

**LIFE UNDER LATEX** 25 YEARS OF SPECIAL MAKE-UP FX

BRITAIN'S LONGEST RUNNING SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

**ISSUE 206**

# INTERZONE



## ORIGINAL SF & FANTASY STORIES

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COMING SOON PAUL MELOY'S 'ISLINGTON CROCODILES'  
ILLUSTRATED BY VINCENT CHONG



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## EDITORIAL

### NEW PEOPLE AND UPGRADED BITS

The *Interzone* team has two new members: Liz Williams and Michael Reuter.

You know Liz well, she's published several excellent stories in *Interzone* and elsewhere, and several excellent novels. She will help us read, select and edit stories.

Michael will develop the electronic formats of *Interzone*, which will be sold via places like fictionwise as well as our own website. Making an electronic version of the magazine has been on our minds for some time, and it was a reader suggesting it on the forum recently that stung us into action.

As you may have noticed, the forum was closed to new posts for a short while due to massive and unrelenting spam attacks. We've now tidied up a bit and introduced some spam-busting measures, so now is a good time to either return or pay your first visit ([ttopress.com/discus](http://ttopress.com/discus)). For those of you who still miss a letters column in *Interzone*, we remain convinced that once you get used to it, the forum is much better: you can get a response almost immediately and can enter into any number of almost-live conversations with likeminded people, as well as talk directly to several writers and publishers who have message boards there.

### COMING SOON AND CASTING VOTES

*Interzone* 207 is a Terry Pratchett Special Issue, containing an in-depth interview with Terry and colleagues like Neil Gaiman, plus details and images of Sky One's Christmas Day *Hogfather* film. We should also have Christopher Priest on *The Prestige* book and film, as well as some mindblowing original sf stories.

It'll also be time for the annual readers' poll, which will cover issues 201–207. (Seven issues, but this will then bring the poll back onto a Jan–Dec footing.)

Beyond issue 207 and into *Interzone*'s 25th anniversary year, there'll be a Michael Moorcock Special with interview and exclusive fiction; and stories by some of *Interzone*'s golden generation. Make sure you don't miss any of it!



Richard Linklater, rotoscoped in the manner of *A Scanner Darkly*

### AS OTHERS SEE US

**Richard Linklater, maker of the latest Dick film, generalizes:** 'What appealed to me about *A Scanner Darkly* [...] is that it's not really about "the future." It's about Joe Everyman and his pals, worrying about money and sex and being frustrated. A lot of sci-fi deals with these amazing futuristic worlds where humans have suddenly lost all their humor and become emotionless automatons.' (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 Jul)

**But Michael Gove MP warns:** '...there are things that men can read which can send out signals which are deeply, I think, unattractive to women.' John Humphries: 'Such as?' Gove: 'Well, sci-fi and fantasy. I think if you're the sort of man who's reading one of those lurid books with, sort of, triple-breasted Amazonian women on the front cover, and inside it's all about swords and sorcery, and so on, then I think what you're communicating to any woman is that you're still an adolescent.' (BBC Radio, *Today*, 1 Aug)

**Terry Pratchett** has a crushing reply for interviewers who ask him if he'd appear on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*: 'No, I happen to be one of those people whose memory shuts down under pressure. The answers would come to me in the middle of the night in my sleep! Besides, I am a millionaire.' (*ALCS News*, May)

**Malcolm Edwards** arranged for some of the late John Brosnan's ashes to be scattered in his native Australia: 'You have to buy a box for the purpose from the crematorium, which proved to have two stickers on the underside. One said JOHN BROSNAN; the other MADE IN POLAND. None of us had known that.'



# DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK



J.K. Rowling

**J.K. Rowling** was voted 'Greatest Living British Writer' by readers of *Book Magazine*. Mr Pratchett came second; other familiar names include Philip Pullman (6), Iain (M) Banks (14), Alasdair Gray (=19), Neil Gaiman (=21), J.G. Ballard (=28), Jasper Fforde (=36), Diana Wynne Jones (=36), and Michael Moorcock (=44). Muriel Spark appeared in 15th place as, presumably, Greatest Living British Writer Who Is Dead.

## THOG'S DIACRITICAL MASTERCLASS

"I am Oom-laut," he said, and those two words seemed to convey the impression that he was afraid of nothing.' (M. Howard Lane, 'Queen of the Huallaga', *Mystery Adventures* 11/36)

## AS OTHERS SEE US II

We are slans: 'A lone clairvoyant among morons is often how a science fiction fan feels. Maybe he finds a sidekick or two to take the edge off his isolation, but when you're in the throes of fandom, the real world can become an imprecise blur. [...] Just as certain novels make heroes of bookish, melancholy, know-it-all types and thereby endear themselves to literary critics, certain television shows make heroes of obsessive, techy, alienated types,

and thus endear themselves to sci-fi fans.' (*New York Times*, reviewing *Eureka*, 18 Jul)

## ARCANE AWARDS

**Campbell Memorial:** Robert Sawyer, *Mindscan*.

**Heinleins** for lifetime sf achievement: Greg Bear and Jack Williamson.

**Jack Trevor Story Memorial Cup.** Michael Moorcock reports from the judging panel: 'The cup and the cash prize of \$1000 will be sent to the unanimous winner, who can best be relied upon to meet the condition of the prize that it must be spent in a week to a fortnight and the author have nothing to show for it, Mr Steve Aylett.'

**Sturgeon** for short story: Paolo Bacigalupi, 'The Calorie Man' (*F&SF* 10/05).

**Paul Barnett** of Mythic Entertainment explains the High Fantasy nuances of *Warhammer Online*: 'The best thing is that all the races are total clichés! Orcs are soccer hooligans! Dwarves are like Northerners. They like to drink, they spend all their time down pits and they've got no money...and the Dark Elves are plotting...but we don't care about that! Everybody fights everybody, forever, and that's all we're really interested in.'

## THOG'S MASTERCLASS

**Double-Entendre Dept.** 'He exhibited his seed, of which Grace had already spoken to her half-sister. / "What do you want done with it?" inquired Virginia, holding it to the light between her thin thumb and finger.' (David Lindsay, *The Violet Apple*, c1924, published 1978)

**Dept of Spung!** 'Even through two layers of combat armour, I felt her nipples brush against my back...' (Karl Hansen, *War Games*, 1981)

**Eyeballs in the Sky Dept.** 'His eyes ran like weasels over the faces of the other players...' (Philip José Farmer, 'Attitudes', *F&SF* 10/53) 'His eyes roamed around the workshop, knocking over tables and equipment, until they settled on my Master, who had looked up in surprise.' (Matthew Skelton, *Endymion Spring*, 2006)

## R.I.P.

**Jim Baen** (1943–2006), noted US sf editor and publisher, died on 28 June following a stroke. He was 62. His career began at Ace in 1972, and after a stint editing *Galaxy* and *If* magazines he returned to Ace in 1977 as sf editor (later executive editor and vice-president), and editor of the paperback magazine *Destinies*. In 1980 he joined Tor, leaving in 1983 to form his own Baen Books.

**Tom Frame** (?–2006), Briton who was the main comics letterer at *2000 AD* and worked on most *Judge Dredd* strips, died on 14 July.

**David Gemmell** (1948–2006), UK author of 30 popular heroic fantasy novels beginning with *Legend* (1984), died at his word processor on 28 July. He was 57 and had seemed to be making a good recovery from his quadruple heart bypass two weeks before. John Clute wrote in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*: 'He is one of the central entertainers of the genre.'

**Peter Hawkins** (1924–2006), UK actor who voiced *Dr Who's* Daleks (film, 1965) and *Cybermen* (tv, 1967–8), died on 7 July aged 82.

**Tim Hildebrandt** (1939–2006), half of that US fantasy-art team the Brothers Hildebrandt, died on 11 June aged 67. With his surviving twin brother Greg he painted the original, iconic *Star Wars* poster, several 1970s Tolkien calendars, and many book covers.

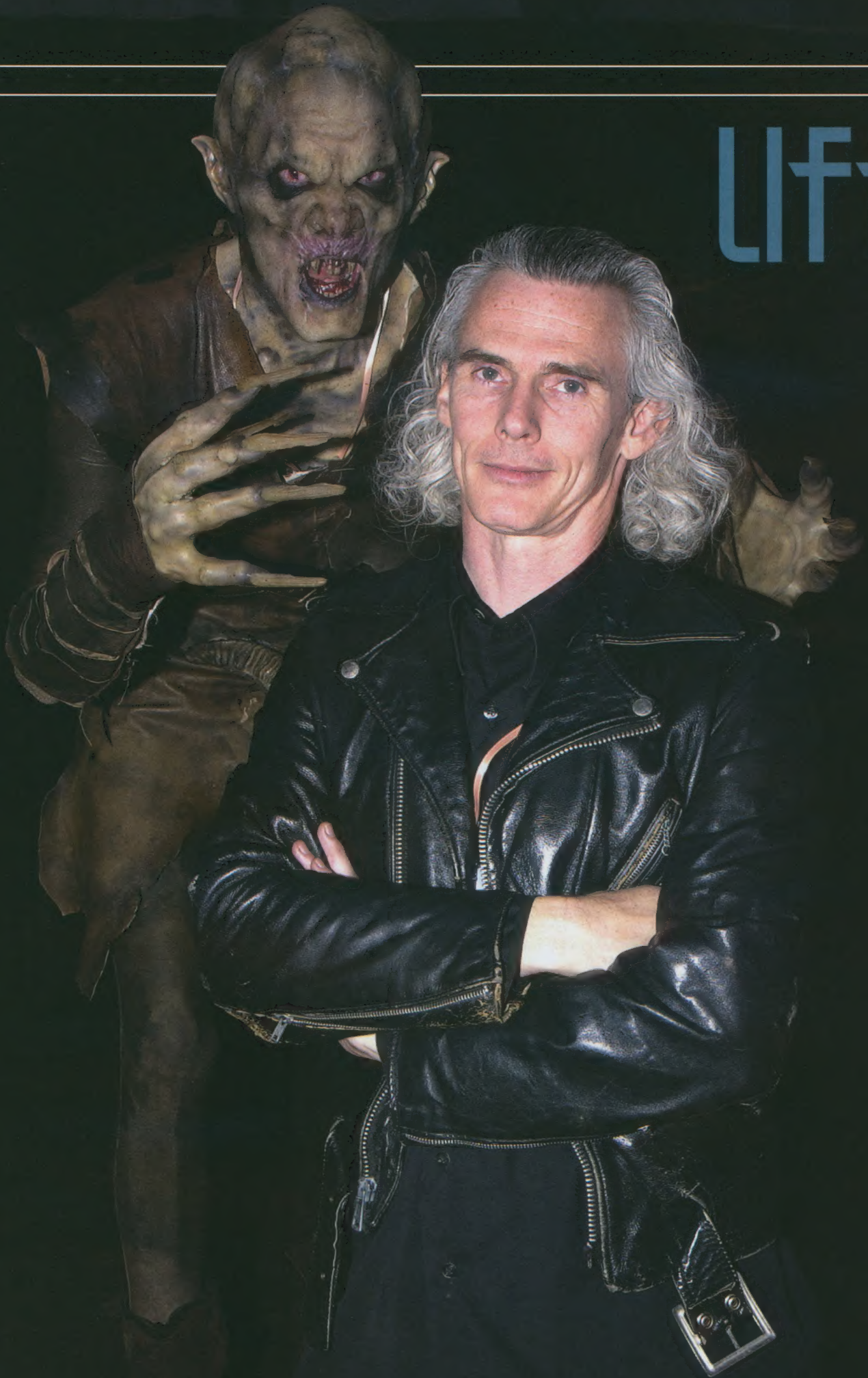
**David Maloney** (?–2006), UK tv director/producer who directed 46 episodes of *Dr Who* (between 1968 and 1977) and produced 39 of *Blake's 7* plus the 1981 *Day of the Triffids*, died on 18 July.

**The Perishers**, the *Daily Mirror* cartoon strip launched in 1958, ended on 10 June. Apparently the backlog of scripts by long-time writer Maurice Dodd (died 31 December 2005) had run out. No more Eyeballs in the Sky...

**Karl T. Pflock** (1943–2006), US ex-CIA author of some short sf and the debunking book *Roswell: Inconvenient Facts and the Will to Believe* (2001), died on 5 June; he was 63.



# LIFE





# UNDER LATEX

**I**n 1981, *An American Werewolf in London* scared the knickers off unsuspecting cinema audiences. Still popular today, the reasons for its long-term success include its ground-breaking special effects and make-up.

In 2001, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was at the height of its popularity and regularly featuring some highly convincing vampires and demons with devilishly state-of-the-art make-up.

In *American Werewolf*, actor David Naughton played David Kessler, the doomed US-tourist-turned-werewolf, and while shooting the movie Naughton spent many gruelling hours enduring brand new make-up techniques.

Twenty years later, refined versions of those techniques transformed actor Camden Toy into one of the eerily evil Gentlemen in his first villainous *Buffy* role. Toy went on to be the only person to play four different villains in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* series.

Technology and the chemicals used in make-up have developed significantly since *American Werewolf's* release, but has the experience in the make-up chair changed so much? David Naughton and Camden Toy talk to SANDY AUDEN about their lives under latex...

## DAVID NAUGHTON



### GETTING STARTED

For *American Werewolf in London*, my agent just sent me to meet with John Landis and that's really all it took. Normally you have to go through screen tests and so on to win a role but this was pretty much by an interview.

I had a nice long chat with John in his office. He's a very animated person and you do most of the listening, but that interview was all it took. He said, "Call me tomorrow." It was a bit odd but next day when I called he said, "Do you want to be a werewolf?"

Well, the script was a pretty straightforward tragic love story where a guy can't believe what his friend is telling him, and he falls in love with a nurse and ultimately succumbs to the tragedy of being a werewolf. It's tragic in a sense that here are these characters that don't really have any control over what happens to them.

I thought the idea that the two buddies – one of whom is killed on the moors – continued to have scenes together was very funny and unique. So of course, I said yes to the role and that was it. Getting the part from that single interview was a little unusual, but it was probably because John had written the script and was also the director and executive producer – he was the guy for this project.

John also said I needed to get over and meet with Rick Baker because there was a lot of preliminary make-up things that he wanted to do. So as soon as I got the part in October – we started shooting in February – I got right over to Rick and started with them. It required going to his shop. These days it's a very elaborate three-story building that he has in southern California but at the time he was working out of a garage, a rented space with his group of young apprentice make-up artists and big tubs of fast drying cement. I didn't really know anyone working on the film at this stage but I certainly got to know Rick and his gang pretty quickly and I would meet all the cast once we got to England.

### CHANGING FACES

Nowadays, many people have head moulds done. In fact Rick Baker has a whole wall of actors' faces who have had moulds done – Michael Jackson, Eddie Murphy etc – but those were all after me. Back then, I felt like a pioneer. I was still unsure of this whole process, but they did assure me that it was safe. (Yeah sure!)

My limbs were first and it's pretty claustrophobic once you get your arm in. You can feel it drying and there's a pressure on your arm as it dries all around. You have to pull your arm out slowly, but it doesn't come out easily so you really have to work it out and untangle it while trying to save the mould and





keep it intact. It took twenty minutes for each arm and then they did my legs.

It's a quick drying process but it's not until you get your head done that it suddenly becomes a whole new game because obviously you're not seeing, and you can't hear when they put that stuff in your ears so you're encased inside this little tomb. It's not for the faint of heart. It's just not easy to do. You feel like you can't escape and you just want to have them stop.

You're inside for twenty minutes again (but this time it seems much longer) until they pull your head out from under it while trying to preserve the impression. Then they say, "That was great! We only need three more!"

So the process runs over a few days and you have to trust that they know what they're doing. Once you'd had it done you would jump in the shower with relief because you'd be covered in this quick drying alginate and stuff – it's just like having your teeth moulded at the dentist but it's your whole body being done.

And on the script, on the page, all this is just two sentences. "He begins the transformation..."

Once Rick Baker had all the moulds of my body they did the sculpting and the painting. They really were artists. And then they would bring these rubber appliances over to England in suitcases. It was the funniest thing: they just put them in their own suitcases and went through customs. Do you have anything to declare? No, just body parts, and wolf heads and gallons of blood! But they got through it okay.

When we got over to England and we were in the shooting of the film, those scenes finally came on the schedule. This was the beginning of the transformation and I was picked up at 4:30AM and taken to the studio and we'd start the make-up session which would take *all day*.

On the one hand it was interesting but when they actually apply the make-up to you, when they had all the finished pieces, that was when it really got fun. The first thing they did was put these giant paws on my hands so my fingers were completely immobilised. No going to the restroom after that!

After a while you just don't want to be touched. There were people around me continually and I'm sitting in the chair for ten hours with nothing to do. I couldn't even

sleep! There was always someone spraying this freezing cold glue on my body and applying hairs strand by strand. And you have to participate by holding your arm up when required and being active and conscious, watching the slow transformation as the make-up goes on.

It really wasn't an easy process. I don't wear contact lenses myself and back then they used full glass lenses that were painted and put in your eyes. They went over the entire eye, not just your iris and they pulled them out with little suction cups. (That was fun!) You can only have them in there for fifteen minutes they said. But when you're shooting a scene, fifteen minutes goes by very quickly and nothing's been shot. Meanwhile you've got lenses in your eyes and make-up on and you

can't see or hear or even talk.

These days they use soft ones that you can see through and wear for longer periods of time. These days there are movies where actors are in make-up for a long time because the materials have changed and they can stay in them. But at the time, the glass lenses were just not what you wanted to wear for long.

#### BOREDOM FACTORS

You have to deal with long hours in the make-up chair and mostly I was just biding my time, like you're on a long flight that never gets there. Meditation helped I guess.

At the end of the day, I remember them saying they'd gone as far as they could with this make-up, they wrapped and let me go back and get the make-up off – which took

**« After a while you just don't want to be touched. There were people around me continually and I'm sitting in the chair for ten hours with nothing to do. I couldn't even sleep! There was always someone spraying this freezing cold glue on my body and applying hairs strand by strand »**





a couple of hours because they wanted to preserve it.

Then they'd say, "Hey, we'll see you tomorrow for the next stage."

"Couldn't we do this like one day a week?"

"Oh no, this'll be consecutive days." So you'd go home and dread having to get up next morning to do it all over again.

There was a time when my body was in the floor during the transformation and Rick Baker's appliance was attached to me. They were my arms and head but everything else was hidden. They attached the appliance right across my chest. But the wooden floor was sticking in my back and I was in there for four or five hours. Nobody does that anymore. At some point an actor these days will say, "I'm getting out now."

Back then the crew would go off on their breaks. And they'd turn off the lights and leave me in the set. And I'd be going, "Oh my god, my five minutes, they'll be back soon." Occasionally someone would think it was funny to start tickling me underneath the

floor until I threatened to get up and rip the appliance.

By the end of the transformation week, I needed a break.

#### CREW REACTION

There was a lot of wonder as far as how it was going to work when we were on set. When Rick's artistry started showing up and we saw some of the make-up and effects, it was awe from the crew because they hadn't seen any of this before, none of us had – how things worked, the arms that stretch with the air bladders, which has been copied since in many films – it was all new stuff at the time and it was pretty interesting to see all his work and the crew coming in.

#### ENDURING MEMORIES

You go through all of this because you know

there's going to be a big pay off and going in and seeing the end product was a great moment. The movie may have been over but I still had to go in to do added or changed lines. Doing the extra screams or growls and seeing it for the first time on the screen, even in its rough form, you were thinking, "Wow! This is going to be cool." We had a good idea that the story would work but the effects were what we were waiting to see on film. And once we saw them, we couldn't wait for it to be released.

David Naughton has a cameo part in the upcoming movie *Big Bad Wolf*. In *Little Hercules in 3-D*, which is currently in production, he plays the track team coach. Hulk Hogan stars and The Rock plays Zeus in a story about a little kid who comes down to Earth and joins a High School track team where Naughton's coach character sees what this kid can do with his special abilities. Naughton is also continuing his career in commercials.

## CAMDEN TOY

Camden Toy's first *Buffy* role was as one of The Gentlemen in series four episode *Hush*. He went on to play two more villains in series seven – Gnarl in *Same Time, Same Place*; and the Übervamp/Turok-Han in *Bring on the Night*, *Showtime* and *Get It Done*. In *Angel* series five he played the Prince of Lies in *Why We Fight*. All these parts required extensive prosthetics so Toy is perfectly placed to discuss twenty-first century make-up techniques...

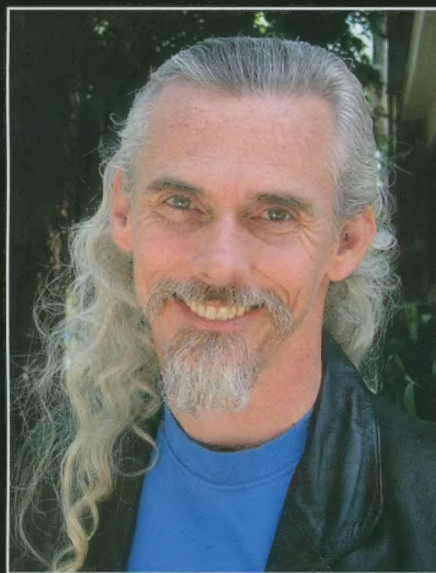
#### GETTING STARTED

My first audition was for the Gentlemen. My agent called to say that the audition was for 7PM that same evening. TV casting is normally quite quick anyway – you only have a day or two to prepare for an audition – but this was unusually quick. And there was no script either, it was an improvisation. Again, very unusual for TV, so I was certainly intrigued.

The original name of the character was the Laughing Man. So when I got the call I thought maybe there was a lot of laughing involved. When I got in there, I was told there was no talking, no laughing – it was a totally silent character!

They explained that these guys float everywhere and they smile a lot. They said at the audition, "We want you to float in, take your scalpel out, cut the (imaginary) co-ed's heart out and float out again." So I went in and did just that. I have a lot of physical background in mime and clowning and martial arts and dance so the floating was easy to approximate.

[*Buffy* creator] Joss Whedon was at the audition and he said that I was scary enough even without the make-up so I got the role.



#### CHANGING FACES

It took, on average, four to five hours to get into the make-up for each character. Some days it was less, some days more. It depended on the character and prosthetics used. The Gentlemen was a skull cap where my ears were being shown but there was a face prosthetic and a neck piece and thin foam pieces that went over my hands.

Gnarl, Übervamp and Prince of Lies were all cowl (like the headpiece Batman wears that totally covers his head but the face shows through). The Übervamp face prosthetic was all silicone and Prince of Lies was all foam.

In Gnarl's case, it was a cowl and a bodysuit

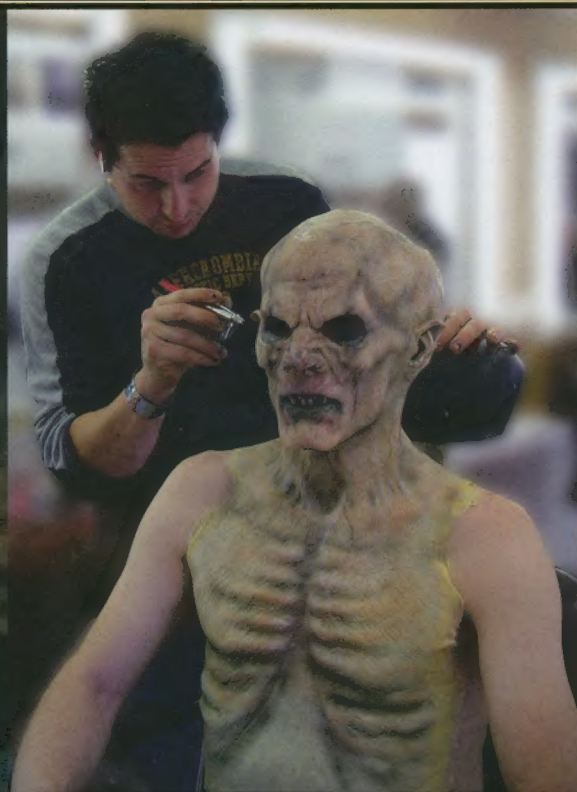


and I also had extra prosthetics on the face, chin, nose, forehead, and cheeks. They were constructed of gelatin even though the rest of the suit was made of latex. It was a bold choice to use gelatin but the huge advantage it has is that it has weight like actual flesh does. It has a similar translucency too. So it gave more life to the character than foam would have done.

But it's not an easy material to work with because it melts, and it did on the second day when I got overheated! They actually kept repairing the seams that day but then, late morning, one of the make-up staff just reached over, ripped my nose off my face,

photos © Robert Hall - photo of Camden Toy © Peter Grief





threw it up against the wall and said, "Go to lunch we'll put another one on afterwards!" And they did. So gelatin's not used a lot.

Optic Nerve did the head-casts for the Gentlemen, but when I went back to do Gnarl the new company, Almost Human, had to totally re-cast it. Because Gnarl was a full bodysuit, they had to do my head and face right down to the shoulders, my entire torso and legs and then my hands and feet and finally my teeth. I spent a good part of a day being moulded.

The head cast is a little claustrophobic but there's a weird part of me that kind of enjoys it! This is partly because I was playing with stage make-up from a very young age. My father was a make-up artist and he was generous enough to share his love of make-up with me when I was in grade school, where I would literally create characters from his make-up kit. So there's a perverse side of me that finds it fun.

But it *is* claustrophobic and you can't go there, you just have to breathe through it, relax and kind of surrender to it because if you fight it, it'll be worse. Particularly for Gnarl's make-up – it's an entire bodysuit and I'm totally sealed in the outfit. There was a moment when I was getting into that suit that part of my head was going, "Oh my god, you're being sealed in!" Now, I'm going to be in this for twelve to fifteen hours so you can't go there. But part of your brain is going, "Aargh! Get me out of here!" You just have to embrace it and make it your friend. It was the first time I'd felt that way but I was fine.

Other costumes had different problems. The Übervamp had full flare contact lenses that fit over the entire eye. You can see through these lenses but in case of the Übervamp they were almost like cat eyes and they would wander slightly so that pupil part you can look through would move. So sometimes that would be a little blurred and I had to be careful that they were lined up at the start of the day.

When we were filming Gnarl, the cave had a lot of dust in the air and it was causing me problems. Particularly on the second day because we had a lot of fighting to do, which stirred up a lot of dust and my eyes were incredibly irritated.

For the Gentlemen the contact lenses were a little bit harder to see through because the pupils were jagged as if they were broken. But as the Gentlemen we were either on wires or on those little platforms that were being wheeled around on tracks so we didn't really need to see where we were going because we weren't walking.

Moving in make-up is a different approach to normal acting. No two characters are the same. I approached Gnarl differently to the Übervamp which was different again to the Prince of Lies – because they're all different physicalities. There's an old saying in clowning – the European tradition – that you 'play to the nose'. You're wearing a prosthetic that sits on your face and responds to your expression. You play to it and know what your angles are because something may play three quarter but not full-on, or it may play

full-on but not in profile.

You usually have full expression to consider too. It's all glued on very securely – every single millimeter of that make-up is attached to my face – and you want it that way. The make-up on Gnarl was very extreme – huge nose, long chin, shark-like teeth but he's also very verbal so again, you have to think about your approach.

Those rest of those creations are attached firmly to me too. The hands and feet are glued on, and the Gnarl suit was like a glove because it was moulded to my body shape, and all of the seams were glued down. So going to the restroom was impossible.

The make-up people kept saying, "You know, we can cut you hole!" And I thought that's so not going to happen! So I had to hold onto it. I drank enough to keep hydrated but not too much to need to go to the restroom.

Then late on the second day of the Gnarl shoot, they had to get me half way out of the suit so they could get me in a harness because I was on a wire. As soon as they got me out, I was like, "See ya, I'll be right back!" and ran for the rest room, but I held it in the entire first day.

#### BOREDOM FACTORS

When you're in the make-up chair you're not just sitting there, you're a participant in that process. It has to feel right to you. You have to open your eyes, look up, smile, don't smile, put the teeth in and so on. It's really a collaborative process and people don't really realise that. We're constantly talking and





checking in with each other about how it's feeling because if you don't you can't bring it to life as well as you could. For me it's a fascinating process.

And you get used to it because you're doing it every day. The Gentlemen was seven consecutive days and Prince of Lies and Gnarl were three day shoots.

I had four episodes to do as the Übevamp and we were shooting on an eight-day-per-episode schedule. But while we were doing *Bring On The Night* and *Showtime*, there was so much extensive fighting that we went over schedule. We'd started *Showtime* but we hadn't finished *Night* yet so in the afternoon, we'd go back and pick up things we hadn't finished in *Night*. It just happens sometimes.

We were on *Night* for nine to ten days then as we're finishing *Showtime*, we have to go back and re-shoot the last fight scene between Buffy and the Übevamp which takes place at the construction site because we needed more close-ups. But the site was no longer available so we had to shoot it at the studio and make the set match the real location. I'd challenge anyone to tell the difference. They re-produced the corner by the scaffolding perfectly. It was quite amazing.

But of course, sooner or later the make-up had to come off. It averaged about an hour to take off and it's great when it's all gone and you can get a hot towel on your face. They use a number of different solvents to remove it. My skin is actually fairly sensitive and fortunately the make-up people recognized this and used some very gentle oily remover.

But while it's gentle, it also *destroys* the prosthetic, which means you can't re-use certain pieces. A lot of times, shows don't re-use pieces because it's expensive to keep re-making them, but I was fortunate that the producers agreed for make-up to use the gentle remover. I know some shows won't allow that.

#### CREW REACTION

The Gentlemen – the costume, the make-up, and the way we did them – were much scarier than I think anyone imagined they would be. Everyone was responding to the outfit. People on-set were literally scared of us. You think at first they're kidding but they weren't.

It was Amber Benson's first episode of *Buffy* and she's even said in interviews since that you'd think that there's no way these characters would be as scary in person on-set as they are on screen, but when she saw us she thought, "Oh my god, that's even scarier!" But I would suspect, with it being her first episode, things were a bit on the tense side. Even the rest of the gang kind of avoided us. We would sit with the crew at dinner because the cast were avoiding us.

#### INDURING MEMORIES

Several days into shooting, Sarah Michelle Gellar and I had time to get to know each other during the breaks between takes and she turned to me one time and said, "You know, I still don't know what you look like!" That's because I get there hours before everyone else and leave hours after them too.




## THE BEEKEEPER



*I was born in freefall on a boneship of the Stro. My parents named me Elena, after my mother's mother, but to the Hila I am Andalian, orphan of the storm and keeper of Kimonayev's bees.*





## STORY by JAMIE BARRAS    ART by STEFAN OLSEN

We made planetfall one hundred kilometres east of the candidate garden. My father had timed our arrival to coincide with local dusk, and we spent the rest of the night unloading our equipment. By daybreak, we were finally ready to break camp and start for the garden. But we had one last thing to do before we could set off: we had to kill the boneship. Antonov drew the short straw. We all said our goodbyes to the ship and then Antonov fired the safety charges. With a crick-crack of splintering bulkheads and the hiss of released respiratory gases, the ship shuddered and died. We watched the outer shell begin to warp



and bubble as the accelerated processes of decay began. By the time that they finished, all that would be left of the ship would be a quarter-tonne of cellulose and a few hundred grammes of long-chain hydrocarbons, alcohols and esters. Even the most iterated of Melzemi hunters would be unable to distinguish the remains from the indigenous flora. It was a sad end to an old friend, but it was something that we had to do just to survive.

We turned away at last and climbed the valley side to watch the sunrise. We were none of us planetborn – this was the first real sunrise for us all. We stood in silence with our faces to the sun and drank in the heat, the light, the depth and breadth of it all. Kimonayev's bees buzzed lazily about our heads seemingly just as mesmerised.

"We're here," Antonov said at length. "We're finally here."

Sylvain laughed derisively. "We're stuck here, you mean." She gestured back down towards the valley floor. "We just blew the brains out of our ride."

My mother hugged me close and shook her head. "Have a heart, Marie."

Sylvain ignored her.

"We can express our reserve ship once we get to the garden," Kimonayev said. Every search team carried a spare copy of the boneship expression licensed from the Stro.

"If we can make the garden bloom," Sylvain said, rounding on Kimonayev – she didn't need reminding what we could or couldn't do. "And what chance of that? A Class D, on the edge of Melzemi territory? The last time that I was awake, the *Veche* would never have wasted a search team on a prospect as poor as this."

Sylvain appeared young in years – not more than forty. In fact she was the second oldest on the team in terms of time spent. Thanks to the vagaries of *Acheron's* coldsleep lottery the last time that she had been awake had been over two hundred fixed years earlier. Back then, the *Veche* – *Acheron's* governing committee – had not been even a third of the way through the list of abandoned gardens that they had bought from the Stro. These were different days: only a quarter of the list remained, and *Acheron's* search teams had still not found so much as a single uncorrupted copy of the faster-than-light expression. These days, the *Veche* sent teams to anywhere within range.

"We'll make do," Kimonayev insisted. He looked at least thirty years older than Sylvain, but he was far younger in terms of time spent, with only a single, two-decade-long spell in coldsleep behind him. The things that he knew about how things currently stood with *Acheron* made him much more stoical.

Sylvain started to respond but my father cut her off. "We're wasting daylight."

Sylvain cursed.

My father looked to her. "Are you done?" After a long moment, Sylvain nodded her head. "Good." My father looked to

Kimonayev. "How are your little pets doing, Alexandr Simonovitch – they ready to travel?"

Kimonayev's bees were only a couple of hours out of coldsleep, but they were typed for quick recovery and rapid orientation. Kimonayev watched them sketch patterns in the air for a few moments then turned to my father. "Yes, Grigori Petrovitch."

"Then let's go."

Early on the first day of our march, we cut the trail of some local animal life. My mother and Antonov broke out a couple of dumb guns and set off to follow the trail. They returned half an hour later carrying the carcass of a small, grey-haired quadruped: binocular, binaural, warm-blooded. Sylvain ran its DNA: it was indigenous – not a child of the garden. She extracted and then strained its stomach contents. The juices went into one of her vats. To survive on this world we would need to eat what the local animal life ate. The contents of the dead quadruped's stomach would provide the source code for the retyping of our own intestinal flora and fauna. At dusk, Sylvain dosed us with a cocktail of laxatives and oral antibiotics followed a couple of hours later by helpings from the contents of the vat. By dawn the next day, we were ready for our first breakfast of locally grown food: fruits and legumes chased down with unfiltered local water.

We were adapting, getting ready for the physical challenges ahead. By the third day, even I was finding the going easier. The first two days, I had struggled. My mother had taught me to swim in the boneship's bladder, developing my muscles by making me push and pull myself through the water, but, even so, supporting my own weight had not come easily to me after an infancy spent in freefall. And yet by that third day, I was able to walk unassisted – and even run for short distances. It felt good.

We reached the lower slopes of the garden's outer rim on the afternoon of the fourth day. A short reconnoitre showed that we were less than three kilometres south of the spot that the survey from orbit had fixed as our point of entry into the garden. This was a broken line of ridges streaked with waterfalls, and stacked one above and behind the other like a crumbling staircase. Although it was impossible to tell from the ground – clouds shrouded the rim's upper reaches – the survey from orbit had revealed that this staircase led all the way up and over the top. But the top was a full kilometre above the level of the surrounding forestland – even taking it in stages, it wouldn't be an easy ascent, especially with all the gear that we had with us.

"If things go smoothly, we should make it to the top in two days," Antonov said confidently. Like Sylvain, he was of athletic build and a young physiological age. He sounded as if he was looking forward to the challenge.

Kimonayev shook his head and laughed. "What I wouldn't give for a floater right now. Or even just a pallet or two."

There couldn't be any of those things, not this close to Melzemi territory. This was by necessity a largely technology-free expedition. My mother, my father and the other adults would have to carry the team's gear up on their backs.

"We'll rest up for what's left of today," my father said. "And start our ascent bright and early tomorrow. Alexandr Simonovitch: you better start packing up your little pets. It's going to be windy up there."

We made camp. The next morning, while we were still at breakfast, the beyonders appeared.

They were three-metre tall bipeds, bimanous, binocular, binaural, furry-backed, bare-bellied – unmistakably children of the garden. There were six of them, all dressed in the simple animal-skin garments of temperate pre-trade peoples, and carrying rudimentary throwing weapons.

My father went forward to greet them, his hands empty and his face dressed in a smile. They started to close on him, slowly but surely. I hid behind my mother's legs.

"Worker-type three eighty-seven,"

Kimonayev said, keeping his own lips fixed in a smile, but speaking loudly enough for my father to hear. "Low mil. capability, minimal aggression – and zero exchange value."

"What's their trigger?" my father asked.

There was a pause while Kimonayev searched for the answer amongst the masses of information that the boneship's smart engine had fed into his brain during the long journey to the target world. At length he said, "Asbal Command Language – any tone."

The garden-builders had typed their children for obedience – and language comprehension.

My father took another step forward. The beyonders kept coming on. "Stop where you are," my father said, in pitch-perfect ACL – more smart-engine-delivered knowledge. The beyonders came to an immediate halt. "We are no threat to you. Ground your weapons." The beyonders rested the butts of their spears on the ground. My father fixed his gaze on the closest of the beyonders – a redback with a paint-daubed face. "Tell the rest of your group to join us."

There were shadows moving through the trees beyond the clearing's edge – more beyonders; the redback and its five companions were scouts sent to assess the situation. The garden-builders might not have typed the 387s for combat or tactics, but the 387s were smart enough to know not to take any chances.

Nothing happened for a long moment. "Could they be functionally mute?" Sylvain said, speaking Ruslac.

With no master to bring them on, many children of abandoned gardens failed to





develop normally, no matter what skills the garden-builders had hardwired into them. There was no reason to suppose that these 387s would express their language skills in the absence of anyone ever having talked to them. But for all that, after a few moments, the redback threw back its head and called out, "Rest your arms, and come here!"

It pitched its voice high – the sound didn't seem to fit with its massive frame. "That was Child Common," Kimonayev said. He laughed. "Actual Child Common. From the mouth of a child."

The boneship's smart engine had fed us all the sound of children's voices many times across the boneship's three-year fall towards the target world. But that had been on microdat – and mostly simulated speech. This was live – sounds generated within organic voice boxes, given their timbre by a planetary atmosphere.

The redback looked to my father when it

had finished. "They are coming, speaker-of-commands," it said.

My father shook his head. "My name is 'Rahmatov'. This replaces 'speaker-of-commands'. And these are – " he went around the rest of the team – Seremnova, Kimonayev, Sylvain, and Antonov, and the little one there is Elena." He looked again to the beyonder. "Do you have a name?"

Another long pause. Then: "I am the 83rd to be called 'Beyonder Who Starts At The Tall Rock Then Goes Towards The Sun Three Days Before Turning North And Moving...'"

It carried on in that vein for half a minute or more, describing what sounded like a search pattern through the forest that surrounded the garden. Eventually, it reached the end – back at the 'Tall Rock' where it had started.

"I think we'll go with '83,'" my father said, looking to the rest of us for agreement.

More beyonders started appearing from the trees. Within a few minutes, almost twenty had crowded into the small clearing. The shortest was perhaps two-metres twenty, the tallest three-metres ten; fur colours ranged from golden-brown through russet-red to black, and skin tones showed a similar degree of variation. One of the newcomers had lost its arm below the elbow, something that excited some comment and speculation from my mother, Sylvain and Kimonayev – the team's organics specialists. Ofttimes, societies established by the children of abandoned gardens were intolerant of physical impairment. The garden-builders had been interested in only the best produce; they had equipped many child types with an inbuilt drive to attack the weak and the damaged.

"Rahmatov," the redback – 83 – said. "Every member of this party of beyonders is now here." Task completed. Awaiting further commands.

"We going to let them haul our gear for us?" Antonov asked.

"First things first," my father said. He looked to 83 and then pointed to the garden rim. "We need to get to the other side of that. Can the...the 'beyonders' take us there?"

As one, the beyonders all turned towards the garden rim. Then they just stood there looking up at it. Seconds ticked by.

"How sure are we that these are typed for minimal aggression?" Antonov asked quietly. "Because it looks like we have just come up against a local taboo."

"The trigger's stronger than any cultural artefact," Kimonayev said. Some abandoned children came to regard their birthplaces as something like holy ground – closed not only to outsiders, but also to themselves once they were fully-grown. It was an offshoot of their wired-in drive to both protect the garden from damage and to travel beyond its bounds – to deliver themselves up to the harvest. But the garden-builders had placed obedience at every child type's core. That remained a major selling point.

One by one, the beyonders turned back around to face the team once more. 83 dipped its head at my father. "Yes, the beyonders can take you there, Rahmatov."

My mother stepped forward. She looked to my father. He nodded to her: *go ahead*. She turned to 83. "Can you remember the last time that you were there?"

"Yes, Seremnova."

"When was that?"

Another long pause; then, "When I was a child, Seremnova. I was last there when I was a child."

Antonov and Sylvain shared a smile. My mother ignored them and pressed on with her next question. "Do you have a name for it?"

"Yes, Seremnova. It is called 'The Place Bound On All Sides By A Wall That Rises, Not Ten Times The Height Of The Tallest Tree, Nor Twenty Times, Nor Thirty Times, Nor...'"

With the beyonders to help us, it took us less than a day to scale the outer rim. Moving slowly through the mist and rain, we crossed over to the other side and started down. We camped that evening just below the cloud base. At sunrise the following morning, the whole team gathered on a ledge overlooking the garden.

A ring of clouds had settled like a halo over the garden rim – where air from the interior met air of the world beyond – but the sky over the garden itself was entirely clear. As the morning progressed, we watched as the light of the rising sun drove back the shadows and revealed more and more of the garden below. The impact crater was almost forty kilometres across at its widest point, and thirty-five at its narrowest – a testament to the steep angle of descent sketched out by the asteroid that the garden-builders had thrown at the planet. It was perhaps fifteen hundred metres from the summit down to the garden floor – and the floor sloped downwards from there to the crater centre: a measure of the force of that impact.

This was the artificial bowl that the garden-builders had created; the place where they had seeded their garden, safe from contamination by indigenous flora and fauna. There was only light vegetation on the steep slopes at the foot of the rim – grasses and scrub, stands of long-stemmed, flat-capped fungi, and patches of surface mould interspersed with watercourses. Towards the centre of the crater, the vegetation grew denser and more varied; however, grasses, scrub and outcroppings of mould and fungi still predominated. The few stands of trees and tall ferns that we could see stood isolated from one another. The largest was only a few kilometres in length and less than a kilometre in width – a band of woodland crowded into a narrow land bridge between two large lakes just east of the centre of the crater, its trees furred with more fungi and cross-threaded with epiphytes.



More *veldt* than rainforest: this was not how things were supposed to be. The whole scene spoke of serious biomass depletion. And that meant repeated mass emigrations – the sort of thing that had brought our own beyonders to the world beyond the garden. And we could see that the garden was still turning out children even now. The trees and ferns, fungi and moulds, were the factories that produced the seeds from which the children grew, but it was in the lakes and rivers that those children started to develop, and where they spent the first part of their lives. All the watercourses that we could see were dark with organic matter: humus and vegetation, yes, but also neonatal children spawned from seeds carried into the water by the wind.

At the same time, there was precious little evidence of there being mature children still within the garden. They were still obeying that drive to leave the garden – to self-harvest. But each mass emigration was supposed to trigger a balancing event – a ‘bloom’: the process whereby the garden replaced its lost biomass. We were looking down on a garden that had stopped blooming but kept right on producing children, a garden that was slowly, but surely, bleeding itself dry. Was there enough life left in the garden for us to make it bloom again? That wasn’t part of our mission. We weren’t there to rejuvenate the garden; we were there to search for an uncorrupted copy of the faster-than-light expression. However, making the garden bloom was our one chance of getting off the planet afterwards. In its current state, it didn’t contain nearly enough biomass to feed a growing boneship.

“303K,” my mother said. “Perhaps...seven degrees above local ambient.”

“Pretty much what the survey showed,” Antonov put in. “It’s still hot.”

“That’s a good sign,” Kimonayev said.

Sylvain shrugged. “Perhaps.”

My mother turned to my father. “What do you want to do, Grigor Petrovitch?”

My father responded by calling forward 83. He gestured down into the garden. “Do any of your people live here?”

“We are beyonders, Rahmatov. We live beyond.” It gestured back the way that we had come the day before.

“The clue was in the name, Grigor Petrovitch,” Antonov said with a smile.

My father ignored him. Looking to 83 still, he said, “But you do remember being here –” he turned to face the rest of the children “– you all do?”

Not all children were born sapient; many infant children got by on hardwired instinct alone. And many of those children retained no memory of their infancy.

“Yes, Rahmatov,” the beyonders responded, in a ragged chorus.

My father turned back to 83. “Is it a dangerous place?” It was a question that needed to be asked – anything in the garden

big enough or poisonous enough, to worry the beyonders would be big enough or poisonous enough, to worry us too.

“No, Rahmatov.”

“Fond memories, do you think?” said Antonov in Ruslac. 83’s tone did seem lighter whenever it talked about the garden.

Sylvain laughed. “If ignorance is bliss,” she said, “then pre-sapience must be ecstasy.”

“Okay,” put in my father. “I’m satisfied. Secure your gear. We start our descent in half an hour.”

The paths on the garden-side of the crater rim were just as worn as were those on the outside. For a hundred thousand fixed years or more, the children’s genes had driven them to try to climb up out of the garden. Every one of our beyonders had trodden those paths in their youth without knowing why or what was waiting for them on the other side of the crater rim. As we climbed down, my mother quizzed 83 and the rest of the beyonders about their memories of leaving the garden. Her efforts brought forth the story of the society that the beyonders had developed in the millennia since the garden-builders stopped coming back. We had arrived outside the candidate garden at a time of heightened activity. 83 and the rest of his group were there because, after a three-year lull, they were expecting a new wave of adolescent 387s to merge from the garden sometime in the next half-year or so. Beyond society had ceremonies of reception for emerging children, coupled with traditions of sending out colonies when the local population grew too great. A new equilibrium.

Predictably, Sylvain didn’t see it that way. To her, beyond society’s traditions spoke of stagnation. It was a favourite theme of hers: just because some child types hit all the marks for sapience, did not mean that they *were* sapient. “The garden-born lack any innate ability to innovate,” Sylvain said, “to break out of the box. So why do we persist in describing them as sapient?”

“You don’t regard them as sapient just because they can talk?” Antonov said.

“No. No, I don’t. It’s all wet-wired responses.”

“You eat meat, right?”

“Pavel Mikhailovitch...?” my mother asked warily. *Where are you going with this?*

Antonov held up his hand: *it’s okay*.

Sylvain shook her head. “Don’t.”

“No, come on: you eat meat, yes?”

Sylvain rolled her eyes and shook her head – she, at least, knew where Antonov was going with this. “Yes,” she said with a sigh. “Yes, I eat meat.”

“So you would have no problem eating 83, then, being as how, as far as you’re concerned, it isn’t sapient?”

Sylvain kept shaking her head. “The two don’t connect.”

Antonov just shrugged: he considered his point made.

A short while later, we reached the garden floor.

“They’re all distinct cultures,” my mother said. She threw away the last of the mould scrapings that she had taken and climbed back to her feet. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand, leaving a trail in the sweat that had gathered there. There was a slight breeze blowing but the air was heavy with heat and humidity. The atmosphere inside the garden smelled like crushed citrus fruit: at once acrid and overly sweet. My mother turned to the rest of the team. “We’re not looking at a stalled bloom.”

A bloom was a cataclysmic event. It began with a single mould culture, one amongst many in the garden, suddenly starting to grow at an exponential rate, consuming every piece of vegetation in the garden, stripping the garden bare. Fuelled by this feast, it would then spill out over the crater rim and consume every piece of indigenous flora within reach, before channelling all of this new biomass back into the garden. This process completed, the mould culture would then retreat over the crater rim, before finally dying. In time, the garden vegetation would spring reborn from the mould’s rotting remains, ready to begin anew the process of seeding children for the harvest. At least, that was how the process was supposed to work.

“So it could still be just a trigger fault?” Antonov asked. “The bloom never got started?”

“Or the bloom stalled somewhere else in the garden,” my mother said. “Somewhere closer to the centre.” She rocked her head from side to side and shrugged. “Still too early to tell.”

The question was a critical one: we could correct a trigger fault by replacing the corrupted expression for triggering the bloom – an uncorrupted copy of the bloom trigger came bundled with the boneship expression. However, if the bloom had started only to stall sometime later, this would suggest that the problem was with the whole garden – something lacking, a more widespread corruption. Trying to trigger a fresh bloom would be a waste of time in that scenario.

“I’ll have to conduct a wider search,” my mother said, looking to my father. Then she paused as the air thickened suddenly with a cloud of spores. When the cloud had passed, she sneezed, clearing her nasal passages. Then she concluded: “And run a lot more tests.”

My father nodded. “We can all get involved in that – the beyonders too, if you think you can use them?” My mother nodded. “Good.” He turned to Kimonayev. “Meanwhile, time to release your little pets, Alexandr Simonovitch, and set *them* to work.”

The whole team stopped to watch Kimonayev set free his bees from their little prison. Whatever slim chance we had of successfully completing our mission rested





with Kimonayev's bees. The faster-than-light expression was one small part of a longer expression, the blueprint for a star-faring vessel built on a much grander scale than the boneship that the *Veche* had licensed from the Stro. Either by accident or by design, seeds for this particular child type were very rare. Only half a dozen or so species were known to possess an intact example – the Stro, the eternally-hostile Melzemi, a few others – and none of them was willing to license the faster-than-light expression to humanity at a price

that the *Veche* could afford to pay. So, instead, the *Veche* had chanced everything on buying a list of abandoned gardens from the Stro. *Acheron's* search teams had been working through that list for over three hundred years searching, without success, for a seed that humanity could call its own.

That was where Kimonayev's bees came in. Every child type carried an identifying genetic marker. But we couldn't hope to search the whole garden by hand, sampling every seed on every piece of vegetation. We just couldn't

do it. But the bees could. *Acheron's* geneticists had programmed them to 'taste' everything in the garden in search of the marker for the FTL-equipped child type; and, if they found it, to return then to their handlers and 'dance' out the location to them. We were too close to Melzemi territory to use a machine-based search method, but even if that had not been the case, the bees would still have been just about the best way to conduct the search.

Kimonayev released them. They took a few moments to orientate themselves. Then they



went to work.

My father turned to my mother. "How do you want to work our own search?" *For the answer to the mystery of why the garden had failed to bloom.*

My mother pursed her lips and thought for a moment. Then she said, "Let's start at one of the watercourses."

"What about the local childlife?" Antonov said.

"Stomach contents?" Antonov nodded. My mother looked to my father. "That might be something to set the beyonders to doing."

The 'local childlife' was Antonov's name for children – pre-sapient infant or non-sapient mature – abroad in the garden. We had already seen a few rodents running through the scrub and fungi bushes and some amphibians feeding on the aquatic neonates, but we could expect to find many more, and varied child types much closer to the centre, where the thicker vegetation and deeper rivers and lakes lay. There would be carnivores amongst these child types, but many, including most of the very youngest, would be getting by on a diet of moulds and fungi. And the beyonders were dressed in animal skins, so they clearly weren't averse to killing other living things.

My father gestured to 83. He explained to him what he wanted from the beyonders. "I'd like to go with them," Antonov put in. "If you don't need me at the river." My father assented. Antonov drew a dumb gun then turned to the beyonders. "Come on then." They started to move off, spreading out through the fields of grass and fungi. Kimonayev's bees were already out of sight.

"Pavel Mikhailovitch!" Antonov turned back around. "Tell the beyonders to choose for themselves the animals that they want to kill," my mother told him.

"Why?"

"You don't want to end up ordering them to kill one of their own infant young by mistake. That would be testing a 'local taboo' to the limit, I think."

Just as with some natural-born animal species, there wasn't any great resemblance between an infant child of the garden and that same child in its mature form – or, for that matter, between the child in its infant and neonatal forms. As my mother was reminding Antonov, metamorphosis was a defining characteristic of the life paths of all child types. Antonov smiled and raised his hand in a gesture of surrender: *okay: you win*. He started to address the beyonders a second time.

The breeze picked up, triggering another cloud of spores. "Let's find a river," my father said, gruffly.

By sunset, Antonov and the beyonders had still not returned.

"Damn the Melzemi," Sylvain said. We had the gear to build a transmitter if ever we found what we were looking for, but we weren't

carrying any other comm. equipment – not even line-of-sight optics. That would have been too dangerous. "And damn the *Veche*."

"I should have made one of the beyonders stay with us to act as a runner," my father said with a curse.

My mother patted him on the shoulder. "It's not your fault, Grigor Petrovitch: they seemed so certain that this place wasn't dangerous."

"Perhaps it is safe for them," Kimonayev put in. His bees were not back yet, either – but that was to be expected: they would keep searching until either they found the faster-than-light child type marker or else had covered the whole garden. That could take fixed weeks or even months. "We're out of place here. That could have triggered an attack response that the beyonders would never have had to worry about themselves. And if Pavel Mikhailovitch told the beyonders to defend him...?"

They would have stayed. They would have died alongside him.

But Sylvain wasn't having any of it. "The beyonders said that this place wasn't dangerous," she reminded him. "If there's nothing here big enough to worry the beyonders...?"

Kimonayev shrugged. He had just been trying to come up with a theory that fitted the facts.

"Right now we have no way of knowing what has happened," my father put in. "But we're not going to take any chances. There's nothing we can sensibly do about Pavel Mikhailovitch tonight. So, we'll make for the rim and camp somewhere above the vegetation layer – somewhere defensible – then tomorrow morning we'll come back down and start a search." He turned to my mother. "You and the little one had better stay up on the rim." He laid his hand on my head. I tried to catch hold of it as he pulled it back, but missed.

My mother shook her head. "Without you –"

"You'll live a long and happy life out there in the wider world." My father gestured up over the crater rim. "You won't have much trouble finding more beyonders."

There were already beyonder groups out there waiting for the next 387 mass migration.

"Light sticks?" Sylvain said.

My father shook his head. "Let's not draw attention to ourselves. We'll pack up our gear, and when we're done, we'll follow the river bank all the way back to the rim."

Night descended; and the air filled with the sound of crying children: calls of warning, calls of challenge, calls to bring the rest of the pride or pack or herd to the feast.

"It's all wrong," my mother said. "If this place is so safe, why have all these children waited until dark to emerge?"

It had been quiet during the day, but we had thought nothing of it. Many child types didn't vocalise, especially when young – the

garden-builders had evidently liked the quiet. But now the garden behind us – closer to the centre – was filled with noise.

We kept moving back towards the crater rim. Kimonayev was in the lead, my mother and I walked close behind. My father brought up the rear, while Sylvain moved parallel to us about ten metres further back from the riverbank. I was the only one not carrying a dumb gun.

It started to rain. The setting of the sun had cooled the air over the garden to such a degree that clouds now covered nearly two thirds of the sky, leaving a hole centred over the middle of the garden through which we could see the stars. They were bright and thickly clustered, and theirs was the only light that we had to guide us. The breeze picked up, then started to gust, causing the sound of crying children to wax and wane like a pneumatic siren.

"It's all wrong," my mother repeated.

We kept moving.

The Hila caught up with us just short of the foot of the crater rim.

Up until that moment, we had been making good progress. Then, suddenly, my father called out, drawing everyone's attention his way. He had drawn to a halt and was looking back down the low slope – back the way that we had just come. "Stop!" he shouted. "Stand still!" Long moments passed. He cursed, brought his dumb gun to his shoulder and took aim.

"They might have trouble hearing us in the wind and rain, Rahmatov!" Sylvain called out from off to the side. I glanced across at her: she too was aiming her dumb gun back down the slope.

My father tried again. "Stop! Stand still!"

My mother moved to one side, coming out from behind my father to get a clear view back down the slope.

I saw them then, the Hila: a mass of dark shapes running through the grass and scrub up the slope towards us. Taller and thinner than even the beyonders, they were moving quickly across the ground, drawing closer and closer. Five hundred metres. Four hundred and fifty. Four hundred. They started to spread out across the slope, forming a line. Those furthest from the riverbank began to outpace the others. The wind and rain grew heavier.

"They're trying to surround us,"

Kimonayev said, as he took up a position between my father and Sylvain. "They're definitely predators of one type or another."

"I don't understand," my mother said.

"What are they doing here?"

Her voice sounded strained. My father came over and placed his hand on her shoulder, but only for a moment. Then he turned back to Kimonayev. "We'll take cover," he said. "The riverbank." He looked to Sylvain. "Marie! Over here!"

We moved quickly, retreating towards the





riverbank, and then lying down in whatever folds in the terrain we could find.

The Hila came on. Two hundred metres. We could see them a little more clearly now. Their features were still a blur, but we could see that they were bimanous bipeds – unmistakably children of the garden – and they were carrying what looked like spears and short propelling sticks.

"I count thirty eight," Sylvain said.

"Same here," Kimonayev put in.

"Stop!" my father called out once more. "Stand still."

They were close enough now that they had to be able to hear him, even in the wind and the rain, but still they came on.

My father cursed. "Marie, give them a warning shot. Negative baffle."

The dumb guns were ultra low-tech – EM-emission free; little more than a means of launching solid-fuel projectiles down a ceramic barrel. Sylvain took hold of the end

of the barrel of her gun and twisted it around, retracting the internal baffles that acted as a silencer. My father wanted her to make some noise.

"That won't work, Grigor Petrovitch," Kimonayev put in. "They're running on a closed command set – that's why they're ignoring your orders. It won't work."

Events very quickly proved him right. Sylvain fired, thunder rolled down the slope, but the Hila kept coming on. One hundred and fifty metres. One hundred.

"Rahmatov...?" Kimonayev prompted.

My father looked to him. Then, without a word, he climbed back to his feet and started to walk back towards the advancing children. My mother cried out and started to rise, but Sylvain took hold of her by the shoulders and pressed her back to the ground. She saw what my mother didn't: we needed to know if the Hila's closed command set said 'kill' or 'capture'. My father didn't want to start a fight if he could avoid it. He advanced at a fast walking pace towards the Hila, his dumb gun held in one hand down by his side.

Within moments, the lead Hila had reached him. My mother stiffened. And then the lead Hila went right past him and continued towards the riverbank. Sylvain cursed. "They saw right through it!"

She didn't doubt the sapience of these children, at least. The lead Hila had left my father for the Hila coming up behind them. And they had done it to keep us guessing about their intentions as they closed on the rest of us. Hila flowed around my father and closed on the riverbank, five, a dozen, still more. They were only metres away now.

I started to cry then.

"Rahmatov!" Kimonayev called out. *Time to decide.*

My mother turned away from the Hila. She laid down her dumb gun and gathered me up in her arms, bringing my face close to hers. Tears mingled with raindrops on her cheeks, just as they did on mine. "I'm sorry," she said.

Then she spoke my trigger word and threw me into the river.

The Hila, military type 5150: the Melzemi – the eternally hostile Melzemi – owned the rights to that expression. *Acheron* had flown too close to the borders of their territory, putting them on the alert. They had sent out more hunters, and, as an added precaution, seeded the abandoned gardens nearest to *Acheron's* flight path with Hila. This was all in the past couple of fixed years – after the last beyonder emigration. That was why 83 and the other beyonders had not known how dangerous their garden had become. It wasn't their fault. The *Veche* had miscalculated. They had taken too great a risk in their desire to make the most of the list that they had sold everything to buy. That miscalculation cost my parents and Kimonayev, Sylvain, Antonov

and twenty or so beyonders their lives. The Hila killed them, just as their closed command set required of them. And I swam away – just as my closed command set required of me – seeking deeper water, chasing the need to eat, grow, and change.

I was born in freefall on a boneship of the Stro, expressed and nurtured through my neonatal and early infancy by Rahmatov and Seremnova. Seremnova named me 'Elena', after her mother, and the whole team called me their little one – *their* child. And my infant form was so like that of a human child: bipedal, bimanous, binocular, and binaural – the garden-builders' favoured design. But I was always, only ever, a boneship-in-waiting: an infant ship type 32, licensed from the Stro. A life-raft on legs. And when my mother spoke my trigger word, moments before the Hila killed her, she began the process designed to drive me towards maturity.

Now. I swim in the deep waters of the lakes and larger rivers, I eat – children, young and old; and Hila when I can catch them – and I grow. None of this has escaped the Hila's attention. They quickly came to call me Andalian – 'orphan of the storm' – because of that night and what they did; although they have added new names for me since. They try to kill me from time to time, as their closed command set demands, but I am quick through the water, and they cannot reach me in the depths of the lakes. I am safe from them. They are not safe from me.

I eat and I grow. But the garden is depleted – it hasn't food enough to help me reach critical mass and begin my final metamorphosis, to harden into bone, to hollow out, become airtight and express a drive system. To escape. And, so, I am in limbo, trapped in adolescence, for as long as there is no hope of the garden blooming. But the trigger for the bloom is within me, and I could release it. My mother found nothing to suggest that it wouldn't work, that it wouldn't trigger a new bloom. And I would lose nothing by trying.

But I don't try. Instead, I wait; because, more than once, I have swum back up river and returned to the place where my parents, and Sylvain and Kimonayev died. I have seen their bodies there, carpeted in moulds and other fungi, slowly merging with the garden. And I have seen Kimonayev's bees. The Hila have learned to their cost not to interfere with Kimonayev's bees, because they are special to me, special because I have seen them circling over his body, landing on it. And dancing.

*I eat and I grow, and I wait. And all the while, I am studying Kimonayev's bees and slowly, but surely, learning the language of their dance.*

Jamie Barras's last story for *Interzone* was 'Summer's End' in issue 204. He'll also have a story in *Interzone's* sister magazine *Black Static*. Jamie lives in Osaka, Japan.



STORIES DISTRO by TIM AKERS ILLUSTRATED by DAVID GENTRY

# DISTRO

I don't. I need a little patience, th

Peter

Teef

What's that about?

sniffer cod

## TIM AKERS

SenseNet

Hit that

Helen

Frank

He's running very blue this time, no que

I'm not sure. I think he may settle

Kevin Lange

Transaction number 3 80 0

Elsa

Someone just killed P

This isn't getting me anywhere, should I give it up?

I think I'm wasting my t

The Global mindnet



The night sky was overcast and thick with summer heat. I parked on the dark side of the street and turned off my headlights. When the engine slithered to a halt, the racket of crickets and the sweet stink of garbage drifted through the car's open windows. I sat for a while, looking at the house across the street.

There was a chain link fence, a short yard of tangled grass and a couple of cement steps sinking into the ground. The front door was weathered and gray with a bulb burning dimly above it. There were numbers nailed to the blistered paint on one side. 732. This was it.

Somewhere down the street there was music, some twisted variant of country rolling out an open window. Dogs were barking and the crickets continued singing. The longer I sat here, the less real it all felt. Being in just one body was part of it, part of the dead feeling in my head. Ever since the attack I had been cut off from the constant traffic of the SenseNet, and with it the invisible spectrum of consciousness that connected my various parts. I felt isolated, sitting on this dark street, trapped inside my skull.

I fished the riot gun out from under the passenger seat and dumped it and the bag of ammunition into my lap. The shells looked like shiny black beetles big as the palm of my hand. I thumbed five of them into the riot gun's chamber, sliding the breech home with a sharp snap each time. The rest I dropped into the open pocket of my jacket.

Another few breaths of summernight air. I got out of the car and started to cross the street, passing from darkness into halogen day. More dogs, going wild now in the neighboring yards. I placed my hand on the chain link fence and vaulted easily over it, into the dingy yard. A couple steps, my heart full in my chest, the backs of my hands itching with fear. My fingers were sweat slick against the matte black plastic of the riot gun. I planted my left foot on the top step, raised the gun to my shoulder and then drove my heavy right heel into the door. The wood shattered, scattering gray splinters into the grass as the door banged open. Beyond, the house was dark and heavy and still.

This all started in the back of Harry Hand's dirty old car, with me sitting in the back seat, and Harry in the front, driving. I was staring at the tattoo on his neck. It was a murderer's dream of a butterfly, made of fingers and eyes and a tiny cluster of teeth for a body. I was there for reasons illicit, so I was riding Peter. The rest of me, Frank and Helen and Teef, they were other places. Peter came out of a bottle, all thick slabs of muscle and reinforced bone, his perfect vision, his razor smile. Built for reasons illicit, Peter was, so I took him and I sat in the back of Harry's ugly car while Frank was trying to get laid and Helen was on her fifth scotch.

When it happened, when Harry smiled his sick dog smile and turned around, and I was looking at the empty black barrel of a shotgun, seeing it through Peter's eyes, it was more like surprise than fear. I mean, those weren't really my eyes. Not like I had been born with them or anything.

A sharp red pop and the back of Harry's car was no longer part of my delicately extensive sensorium. The pain of it, my skull as it shattered, the velocity of my teeth as they tore through the soft flesh of my mouth, stray pellets burying into my chest, my throat, all this dived through the SenseNet, screaming through the spectrum until it lodged into my many heads. Helen pitched forward off the bar, the scotch still cold as she retched it across the floor. Frank fell down, crumpled against Elsa as the two of them walked down the terraced walkways over Cascade. I lay

there, in the bar, on the walkway, running my fingers over the bright red smoothness in my mind. The empty place that had been Peter, now clean and dry and empty, still humming with the impact of the shotgun.

Elsa leaned over and touched my shoulder. "Frank," she said, "What the fuck just happened? What's wrong with you?" Her voice was scared.

I closed my eyes and tried to spit the taste of Helen's bile out of my mouth. "Peter's dead. Someone just killed Peter."

It wasn't the first time one of us had died, of course. The other one, though, I'd known it was coming. I had held Gina in my arms, in Helen's arms, and Helen in Frank's arms, held myself close as her heart had slipped away. That had been sadness, and mourning, and remembrance. Nothing like this. Not like Peter was an actual person, but still. Born or not, vat or not, he had been part of me, and it stung. I stood up, took Elsa by the arm, and hurried down the walkway. People were staring.

Elsa was pale, her thin face cold and wide-eyed against her dark hair. I dragged her behind me as I pushed through the crowd.

"Where are the others, Frank? Helen and Teef? Are they OK?"

"Helen's leaving a bar on Eighth right now. Teef, I don't know. He's logged out. Doing some business." The shadow things Teef did, being logged in could give you away. I had no way of knowing where he was, or if he was OK. And he didn't yet know that part of him had just died. Helen had made it out of the bar, her legs shaking, the pit of her stomach squeezed raw and liquid. Elsa grabbed my arm and tried to slow me down.

"Wait, Frank, do you know where it happened? We should be calling the police, trying to get the body. Frank, we can't just leave him."

I stopped and grabbed Elsa's shoulders. Her pupils were still dialed tight, barely sucking in the Strip's light.

"Elsa, love, anyone that went to the trouble of killing Peter, had Harry kill Peter, that prick, they had to know what he was. What I am. Distributed personalities are fairly rare, but they had to know. If they want to kill me, really kill me, they can't just stop at one body. They'll need to do us all. Right?"

That was all it took, really. Standing there, a heartbeat or two that wasn't spent running away, trying to get Elsa to understand how bad this shit was. They hit me below the jaw, something cold and metallic biting into my neck. Juice, humming through my teeth, filling my eyes and my bones with cold white pain. I folded to the concrete, bit off the tip of my tongue and lay there listening to my heart flutter.

Fingers gripped my hair painfully, dragging my face on the ground before picking up my head. Elsa lay a foot away, blood seeping out of her nose and lining her gums in gruesome red. A thin comma was rising below her eye, a dark bruise forming against her cheekbone. Something inside me rose up, a deep scream of anger that I couldn't give a voice. Nothing in my body would move. I couldn't respond to the desperate blue signals of my mind. My SenseNet connection faded into static noise. Nothing of Helen, nothing of the rest of the connected world. Isolation.

Then a pistol fell against Elsa's head. The barrel traced a slow line from her swollen lip along her nose, brushing her eyebrow. Grinding into her temple. Elsa's mouth fell open, a tiny oh of surprise. She looked like some mechanist's porn star, her perfect lips, the drowsy shock of her eyes. Greasy metal slipped, punched the back of her head out. Pulpy red meat sprayed against the concrete, splinters of bone and emptiness rushing in.

Something steel and cold touched my cheek and I thought



this is it, this is fucking it. Elsa's ruined face grinned at me limply as I faded into darkness.

With lovers, there's something you remember, something that first drifts into your mind when you think of them. The smell of perfume on sheets, a smile, the falling deepness of their eyes. For Elsa, for me, it was her laughter.

I was at the Crescent Street mall, working, sponging off a corporate idea factory. Kevin Lange, I think that was his name. Frank and Helen were sitting in a little coffeteria, pretending to be the intimate couple. It was a little awkward, considering their history. Peter was across the cavern, leaning over the railing, his flat stone face bored. Teef was dark shadows and thermals, perched somewhere in the high rafters, smooth and black and tight. It was a very pro operation, very sly.

Kevin looked just like a kid, his head a little too big for his skinny shoulders, his T-shirt baggy and untucked. He walked through the mall, clenched in the steel ring of Marken security, the people who had paid for his vating, for the careful narcotic dosing and the videogames. Minds like Lange, they aren't born, not like that.

Generally, Marken kept the boy tightly tucked behind corporate walls. Crescent mall was his only out, I think. The signal to noise ratio here was phenomenal, the SenseNet projectors in the various booths flooding the air with adviruses, the close proximity of millions of people logging into the SenseNet, voicing their friends, browsing store catalogs and transacting business. The thin air spectrum was literally clogged with millions of transactions, coursing from head to head. It was impossible to think, to compile full code sentences. Probably the only peace the boy got.

Impossible for normal minds to think, I suppose, but Lange was more. He was some kind of tightly structured mind machine. Marken paid him, bred him, to have ideas, to find missed connections in an increasingly connected world.

The ideas he had were gold, the kind of information that forged corporate dynasties, and Marken kept the boy tight. Usually that meant no SenseNet connection, no venturing out into the global mindnet. So once a year, after the chemical slug that kept him in perpetual adolescence, Marken would trot Lange around the mall while his mind settled down from the buzz. And we would come fishing for ideas.

So far we weren't getting a lot out of the boy. A key ingredient in the formula for Lange's genius was acute sexual frustration, and being in public only once a year clearly didn't help. The boy, forever sixteen, was broadcasting a constant stream of hot pink and faceless masturbation fantasies, the sort of biologically impossible sexual optimism common to professional virgins. It made for amusing viewing, at least for the splinters of my mind that had been born as Frank, but it wasn't going to make me any money.

"This isn't getting me anywhere," Helen whispered through the construct. "Should I give it up?"

"I'm not sure. I think he may settle," Frank responded. "The first hour is always the worst."

"He's running very blue this time, no question. I think I'm wasting my time," Helen said.

"I don't. I need a little patience, that's all."

Helen snorted, then settled into her role. I was starting to have a lot of arguments with myself, mostly between the Frank and Helen bits of me, but that was to be expected I suppose. I settled back and let Teef take the lead for a while. Teef had been born male, distantly, but had slipped into asexuality under a rising tide of chemical and biological alteration. I let him filter through Lange's broadcast and pushed the rest of my personality into the

background. My many minds wandered, and in wandering, I found Elsa.

Like I said, the laughter came first. She walked past my table, brushing Frank on the shoulder as she went by, and laughed. It was the purest sound, the most singular joy, that I had ever heard. It washed over me, through me, shivered through my network from Frank's ears and heart up through Helen, Peter, even into the shadow of Teef.

"What's that about?" Helen asked.

"Hm? Oh. I don't know," Frank said, fluttering his hand. "She's interesting though, don't you think?"

"Wouldn't know." Helen slid her coffee cup across the table and folded her arms. "Just go talk to her. You're disturbing the job."

"Yeah, sure. OK." I isolated the Frank bits of me and snapped his connection from the rest of the construct.

Elsa had settled at a juice bar, about twenty feet away. I don't remember what I said. Too flustered, and the rest of the personality wasn't hooked in to remember it for me. She laughed, and she smiled, and I bought something at the bar and then didn't drink it. I ended up giving her my vox number. When I got back to the table, Helen wouldn't meet Frank's eyes.

"You happy now?" Helen asked when Frank logged back in.

"Happy enough." Frank smiled and dumped the juice into a nearby canister. "You?"

Helen kept quiet. The hashed static of Teef's voice broke in. Movement.

Lange was having an idea. It had something to do with the incidence of girls in yellow boots, correlated to tendencies in color style evolution and related to recent developments in holoscreen technology. The end result, the golden ticket, was a buy order for some recently reclaimed land off the coast of Brazil. It didn't make any sense to me, but I wasn't Kevin Lange.

"Hit that," I said across the construct, and we moved. Helen and I dampened the local traffic while Peter threw static into the Marken filters. Teef slithered down the spectrum and plucked out the relevant data, straight from the boy's head. Smooth. Not smooth enough.

Lange's head shot up. He scrambled an alert to his handlers and started fishing through the SenseNet, looking for us. I shut down the construct, isolated into my individual heads, and scattered.

It was close. Marken security manifested like a magic trick, swirling into existence out of the clean suburban air. Masked riot cops with rebreathers and eyes like smooth black eggs clustered around Lange and started filtering through the crowd, prodding their way forward with blunt rifles. Sniffer code blossomed into the SenseNet, tracing transactions and spot-sampling people's craniums. An amateur would have tried to turn the data immediately, would have fallen right into Marken's search patterns.

Frank, Helen and Peter slipped out at ground level, their SenseNet connections dead, their eyes down and their hands in their pockets. Teef dripped slivers of interesting data into the air, drawing the sniffer code up and away from the rest of the construct. He danced up and out into the rafters, then disappeared in static and stealth. The trail died, the sniffer code circled aimlessly. We disappeared.

After that the Idea went to a man named Malley. Where he sold it, what he did with it, I didn't care. After that, it wasn't my problem.

I woke up in a dark room. My jaw felt like it was wired shut with burning copper. I coughed until I was dry, then pulled myself into a sitting position. The floor here was concrete, cold and gritty.

The

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t sure. I

Key

"Hey, hello?" I croaked, "What's going on?"

I was offline, and that worried me, especially the bits of me that weren't actually Frank. In an arrangement like mine, the personalities get mingled, blurred into a single thinking organism. Even so, there's some individuality left, a tiny plot of self that thinks it's Frank, or Helen, or Teef. Not entirely accurate, really. Even though I, this body, was offline, some analog of my personality was running in Helen and Teef. If they were still alive, that is. And here, in my skull, bits of those other two were panicking about their parent body, trying to reach out across the Net, hoping that they were all right. Strange, talking to yourself about yourself.

There were voices, and then a door opened, light flooding in. I blinked and braced, expecting nothing but trouble again.

"Kee-rist Frankie. You're looking like shit. Feeling much like breakfast, yet?"

"Malley? The fuck you doing here?"

"This is my house, boy. Your strange bits, the skinny one. He brought you here."

"Teef? He's OK, then?"

"Yeah, I guess. He looked scared, though, boy. Scared as I've seen him."

My eyes were finally adjusting to the light. Malley looked the same as always, impeccable and rich and doing you a favor just by talking. Over his shoulder I could see a kitchen of polished chrome and halogen.

"Breakfast sounds good, I guess. Maybe a beer?"

"Uh," Malley halted, and dropped his eyes over my shirt. "Maybe you oughta check out our fine showering facilities first, little man. Looking at you, I might lose my appetite."

I looked down and saw that I was still wearing pieces of Elsa. And then memory surged forward, and I started throwing up.

"Yeah, that's what this room is for, more or less," Malley

sighed, then shoved me back into the tiny concrete closet. "I'll come get you in a minute. Try to keep it off your feet."

"Just shot you? Huh. What's that about, you think?" Malley asked between forks of meat.

"Well," I said, leaning forward on the couch, "I think it might have had something to do with killing me."

"Fuck yeah. Of course. I mean why, young son. Why anyone want to kill you?"

I shrugged stiffly and drank more coffee. I was still trying to sort out why they'd done for Elsa but left me alive. Elsa didn't have any real enemies, at least not the hit squad hiring sort of enemy. It had been aimed at me, but why kill my girlfriend and leave me to walk away?

"That is a dangerous job you've got. Dangerous enemies to be made in the idea business."

"Sure. But why Elsa? What in fuck did she have to do with it?"

Malley shrugged. "Wrong place, wrong time? I mean, she was never on any of your jobs sites, was she?"

"Nope. Business and pleasure, man."

"Yeah. So maybe she got it by mistake." Malley shook his head. "Damn shame. Pretty girl."

I let cold rage drift through me. Yeah. God. Damn. Shame.

"Any word on Teef or Helen?" Malley asked. I shook my head.

"My connection is fried. Whatever they juiced me with punched it out."

"You could direct connect. I've got a manual set around here somewhere."

"No, no thanks. I kind of want to stay off line, at least until I know what's going on. Harder for them to find me that way. If I know Teef he'll do the same." And of course I did know Teef, because I was Teef, in a way.

"So...Helen?"

"Helen knows her shit. She'll stay low. She'll be hard to find until the heat's off." Helen had been spending a fair bit of time logged off the construct lately, too. After our break up, I used her a lot as the pretty interface for my corporate clients, and those types of people liked to talk in a private room. No net connections in or out.

Probably good. Meant she'd be able to think on her own, react without input from the rest of the construct. Christ knows I was going through connection withdrawal. Felt like my brain was half-numb and empty.

"You want me to look? Try to get a handle on where she might be?"

"Yeah," I thought about it. I didn't want Helen to get popped, and a search might draw attention to her. Might draw attention to me. Right now I was safely buried, and really wanted to keep it that way. But Malley, he was careful. "Yeah, OK. Just be tight about it."

"Frankie, my friend, do I know any other way?" He smiled with his wall of teeth. His gentle blue eyes lost focus, and he leaned back in his chair. Seconds later, Malley leaned forward again.

"Done. Any idea what you're gonna do about all this? Elsa, I mean."

"Oh, I've had some thoughts. Some people I should talk to, I suppose."

There are tricks to this sort of thing. You have to approach subtly, ask the right questions, tap the right people. It's like a dance, a gentle seduction of information from the cultural ether.

I dropped my newly stolen Volvo into drive and tore across



the intersection. Up to thirty miles per hour, which was pretty good, before I laid the grill into Harry Hand's dirty old car. I drove straight through the passenger side door in a shattering crash of metal and plastic, caving in the driver's compartment. His windows popped into shimmering pools of snowflake glass. The Volvo's impact alarm was chirping, and people were screaming. I cracked the emergency gels on my seat restraints, hopped out of the car and walked around the wreckage. I tore Harry's door open and hefted the yard of pig iron I had swiped on the drive over. I thought of Elsa, the blood in her teeth.

"Hi, Harry!" I yelled, then dragged him out by the face. His eyes were wide with shock and fear.

"Christfuck, Frank! What're you doing here? You fucking hit me!"

"Oh, did I?" I asked, then laid two foot of metal across Harry's knee. It burst into something white and black, streaked in brilliant red. Harry started screaming.

"You see, and I may have been confused about this, my good Harry, but I'm pretty fucking sure you hit me," and I put the pig through his other knee with a long, healthy swing. People were starting to get out of their cars.

"Now. Shut up. Shut. The Fuck. Up. Who paid you, Harry?" But of course, Harry was screaming, wasn't he? So I popped the other thing I was carrying, the little plastic one-time, and punched it into his stomach, just below the bellybutton. He stopped screaming, and started whimpering, and his legs stopped twitching like a stomped bug. "OK. Now, Harry." I put the end of the pig into his knee cap and stirred it around. He couldn't feel it, but no one likes to see their own bones. "Pay attention. You paying attention?"

"Fuck, Frank, I didn't, I mean..." He gulped air and stared at the shards of bone leaking out onto the pavement. "It was just Peter, right? Just Peter. I wouldn't have shot you, you know that."

"Peter and Elsa, Harry," *Elsa, her lips just parting in surprise*, "And maybe Helen, too, cuz I've had some trouble getting in touch with her. You understand, Harry?"

"Oh, christfuck, I'm sorry. I didn't mean nothing."

"Fuck what you meant. Who paid, Harry? Who paid for that bullet?"

"Look, I don't think I should maybe say, I mean, who would hire a snitch, huh? It was just business and all. You know, don't you Frank? Business."

"Yeah, who is gonna hire a snitch, Harry? Who's gonna hire a cripple for that matter, right?"

"Oh, fuck Frank, come on."

He was numb below the belt, thanks to that deadhead injection, so I laid the cold pipe against his elbow.

"Come on, Frank? That's all you've got to say? Elsa's dead, Harry," *Grinning limply, leaking out onto the concrete, her face a foot away and forever gone*, "She's dead, and you're my only lead right now. Think of something else to say."

"I can't man, and you know it. It's business." He was trying to be a hard man now, which I could respect. I nodded and brought the pipe up, then smacked it through his arm. Harry went back to screaming.

"Hey, hey you! Fuck are you doing?" Some guy, two cars down. A siren cranked up down the street.

"Just some business, right Harry?" I yelled back. "This is all just business. Come on Harry, you're running out of bits for me to break open."

"Goddamn it, Frank. Damn it. Can't we talk about this, work something out?" He was talking through tight lips. He had bit his tongue, or lip, and his mouth was quickly becoming more blood than teeth.

"You talk. That's all there is, Harry. You talk." I lifted the pig again, then put it into his mouth and started to grind. Harry's eyes got wide, and he started to blubber around the metal. *Elsa's eyes, wide and scared*. I didn't want to break his teeth, not yet, so I took out the pipe and let him talk.

"It was a fucking vat, Frank. I swear, that's all. A cheap vat, too. Femme form, barely had a mouth to talk. But she paid cash for one dead Peter. That's it. I didn't do the rest of them, and I didn't know nothing about them, either. I swear, Frank, that's all I got."

I nodded. "That's a start. But look, I've got no time here. Public place and all." I waved the pig at the cars around us, and the distant siren. "So let's cut the shit. Right? Cut the shit, Harry."

"That's all, that's everything. Cheap vat, cash, one dead Peter. That's it."

"Sure. But we're gonna stay here until I get a number, friend Harry. Vox number, account number, street address. I don't give a fuck. But a number, OK?"

"Jesus, Frank, there's nothing else. Honest, nothing."

I interrupted him with the pipe. I started with the fingers this time. My boy was running out of bones, and I didn't want to have to start over again with the legs.

"No Helen. When you went down it interrupted the whole personality's connection. You and Helen were the only ones logged in, and it dropped you both off the net. When Teef came back on, he found himself alone." Malley was sitting at his kitchen table, drumming his fingers on the wood and nursing a tumbler of scotch.

"Poor guy. He been back here yet?"

Malley shook his head ponderously. "I'll keep on it. I want to get you all together. All three in one place."

I raised my eyebrows. "Why? I mean, I appreciate the attention, Mal. But Teef, at least, can take care of himself."

"Best way to keep you safe," he shrugged. "That's all. Surprised I haven't found Helen. You two used to be inseparable."

"Things change, Malley. People change."

"Yeah, I guess. And Teef, he's gonna be tough to track down. Running scared."

"Teef doesn't do scared. He does very, very cautious. He'll be around." I cracked the top on a Shepherd's Head and drank.

"Whatever. Anyway, he told me he tracked down your last connection. Found you twitching next to your girlfriend there. Dragged you out from under the cops' noses and brought you here. He went to Helen's last known after that, but no doing. No signs of violence, nothing. Just gone."

"That's weird. That Elsa was dead, I mean, but there was no one around."

"Yeah. That's what he said."

"OK, well, I guess that's it. Where do we go from here?" I asked.

"From here? Where's here? We know shit, my friend."

"You know shit. I have a number." It had taken Harry's teeth to get that, too. I hoped I had gotten it right. He was kinda mumbling, there at the end.

Malley held up a hand, then plucked a packet of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. He lit up very carefully, puffing the cherry into brilliant life. He waited until the pale blue smoke had gathered around us both.

"Cyphers in the smoke. Now, where were we? Oh...a number. Account or something?"

"Production number on the vat that bought the hit on Peter. Think you can find a transaction record for me?"

"It'll be a pirate factory, probably. No records. Clients that hire assassins, they don't want records."

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"Of course. What I'm asking, Malley, is if you can find me those nonexistent records."

Malley smiled like a schoolboy and stretched. "Why, Frank, I just might. Could be I might be able to get you that information. You know, you're building up something of a debt."

"You know I can pay. You'll collect."

"Of course I'll collect." Malley winked at me, then rubbed his face. "I'm just saying. Anyway. I'll see what I can find."

"One more thing. I think I could use a gun."

Malley nodded and stood up. He dipped behind the big granite bar in the corner of the room and came out with something dense and black, a gun with a snout like a fist.

"I was expecting you to say something like that, eventually," Malley said, and smiled.

I stood outside for ten minutes before they let me in. There was at least one gun pointed at me the whole time, dangling from a little ball turret by the front door. That was the one that I could see, at least.

This place was a shit hole. The row of vats along the back wall were green with algae, the pumps and pistons clogged. There were no bodies in the soup tonight.

The whole interface was automated. The voxbox at the door, the clustered cameras in every corner, the track mounted guns. It felt like a turnkey whorehouse, sealed tight and filthy.

"I need to check on a transaction number," I yelled into the square voxbox in the corner. The ball turret sighed and swept the room.

"No transaction numbers," the building said. Its voice sounded like frostbite. "Cash."

I cleared my throat and looked around.

"Transaction number three eighty-oh five ten." A number Malley had slipped across the breakfast table on a piece of paper. He had made me burn the paper, after. "Authorize."

The ball turret sighed again and dipped its studded nose lazily at my head. I tensed.

"Authorize," said the frostburnt voice. "Inquiry."

"I need a delivery address. Trackback."

The ball turret shuddered and there was silence. Internal protocols shifted behind the walls. A screen blinked to life above my head, and words appeared in faint white letters.

"Trackback," the building whispered.

"She was at a job."

"What, Helen? Oh, you mean Elsa." Malley's voice crackled over the handheld he had lent me. "What job?"

Traffic had slowed to a crawl. I flipped the wheel and barreled down a side street.

"Marken. That Lange thing, you remember?"

"Oh, sure. I did the fence."

"Right. Good money. Anyway, Elsa was there. It's where we met."

"Huh. OK."

"I think that's our lead. Maybe."

"Why maybe. You found something at the factory?"

"Something, yeah. But it didn't make a whole lot of sense."

Malley was quiet.

"Did you ever get any static off that job, Mal? Any indications that something went bad down the line. Like maybe Marken traced it back or something?"

"You going to tell me what you found?"

"Not yet. Not right now."

"I think you should come back to my place, Frank. If there's trouble at that level, you should just hang low. Maybe if we got you and Helen and Teef together, maybe I could cut some sort

of deal."

"Deal? The fuck you talking about, deal. Who we gonna make a deal with?"

"Well, you seem to think there's someone. Maybe Lange? Maybe Marken? I don't know, Frank, but if it's that serious you don't want to be driving around in the open."

"Right. You're absolutely right, Malley. I'm gonna come in now. You just stay right there, and I'm on my way."

"Cool. That's cool. I'll look for Helen, and maybe Teef will come around. See you in a bit."

"Yup," I said, then snapped the connection closed and tossed the handheld out the window, in case Malley had a trace on it. I kept the gun, in case he found me anyway.

Corporations kill two ways. Number one, they sent an invitation. They let everyone in the business know who was going to die, and why. The consequences are spelled out. He crossed us, he died. If you cross us, you will die as well. Very clear.

The other way is if they don't want anyone to know. They decide to kill you, and then you die. Naturally, simply, no suspicion. There are a million ways to die. They pick one.

Unless you're trying to kill me. Killing me means getting all of me in one place. Easiest way to do it. If that doesn't work out, maybe you get one of me and use him as bait for the rest. Like Malley's doing right now.

Standing in the factory, listening to the vats gurgle, I had something else in front of me. I had an answer to my mystery that was very clear, too clear, and a complete lie.

The trackback on the transaction was Marken HQ, Dresden. As if the Chief Operatives Officer for the company had jetted over, walked into this shit hole and swiped the corporate plastic. Ordered up a hit on me then flew home. Bullshit.

I drove randomly for half an hour, then picked up a handheld from a drive-in vendor. I made some calls, bought some delicate services. Learned some stuff.

The Lange deal hadn't been a good job. It had been bad trouble, for a lot of people. I was just the last in line, apparently.

My calls bought me two things. First, I learned that Malley's buyer on the Lange data had been unhappy with the results. Whoever it was, they paid Malley off by handing him to Marken.

Second. The trackback at the vat factory was fake. Some very expensive snooping, stuff that would have impressed Teef, uncovered the real data. An address.

This meant a couple of maybes. Maybe Marken's playing us like a badly tuned guitar, using Malley to pluck our strings. Maybe Malley's trying to get rid of us since we got so close to being caught in the act. Maybe some third party is playing Malley and us out against each other. Anyway.

Night was rolling in from the east. I had one more stop to make.

I stepped into the house, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the lack of light. It was dark in here, and quiet. I flipped the gun's selector to the secondary barrel and squeezed off a shot. The underslung was packed with emergency flares, the sort of thing you'd use if you were lost in the woods.

A blue white fist streaked across the darkness and punched into a wall, scattering a blizzard of dry plaster. The flare guttered to life, shredding the darkness in flat sheets of lightning. The room was a trash heap, a jumble of abandoned electronics and furniture. Everything was still in the hissing light of the flare. A smell like chemical waste hung across the room.

One breath, two, standing in the doorway and squinting into the dazzling light. My heart was ringing on a killer's high,



ready to snap, ready to strike. The barrel shivered in my quaking hands.

Something jumped out of the corner and straight at me. I swung the gun at it and snapped off a shot, forgetting to switch the selector back to the primary barrel. Another flare shot off, burying itself into my attacker. Her chest lit up like a burning heart. The hot white stink of chemical fire and petrobiotics filled the room, mingling with charred flesh and drywall. She started screaming, plucking at the flare with burning fingers.

It was the vat, the generically smooth, fake features fluttering through phases of pain and disbelief. Cheap vats didn't do emotion well, didn't have all the moving parts to convey true joy, or fear, or anger, not really. They couldn't do pain either, I thought, then switched back to the main barrel and shredded her. She crumpled into rags of flesh and bone, the shattered flare spreading through the room to start a dozen tiny fires.

"Nicely done, Frank. Your vengeance is served now, isn't it?" I whirled around, gun to shoulder. I only stopped when I saw who it was. Who I was. "You've paid the bill for your dear Elsa, haven't you?"

She leaned against the wall, the lines of her face and neck sharp in the magnesium storm. A quiet smile, a simple smile, then she stood upright and walked into the room, her arms folded across her chest.

"Hi, Helen," I said, and dropped the barrel to the floor, "What's up?"

Lovers should not be personalities, at least not the distributed kind. I was new to the whole scene, still excited about the newfound depths of Teef and Gina, anxious to add, to grow, to fill the earth with my mind.

Helen did not, I think, understand. It was new technology. Even now, not many people can really get their heads around it. Around us. Me. So Helen started off as Frank's lover, and I offered her a connection, a true understanding. A place inside my head, in exchange for a place inside her head. It was exciting at first, very fulfilling. To know your lover completely like that. To see them from the inside. That was for months, eight, maybe nine. Then it got dull, and shallow. In the end all we had was fucking, until that started to feel like nothing more than particularly complicated masturbation. The closer our minds, the farther our bodies. We grew apart, and became one person. It was never the same. I took other lovers, with both Helen and Frank, and things were OK. Until Elsa, until Frank fell in love. Distinctly Frank, and distinctly not Helen. The start of my trouble.

I waved the gun at the burning pieces of the vat. "That was you, too, right?" I asked. She shrugged, and picked her way around the slowly burning room.

"A piece, a sliver. My baser instincts, and nothing more. I don't remember having her, poor child. Do you?"

"Nope. Must have happened while you were off line. All that time you spent as the interface. Away from the rest of me."

"I suppose. It's all a bit cloudy right now. For me." She stopped walking and prodded at a bit of the vat's face, laying on the floor. Something seemed wrong with her, like she was drugged or deeply distracted. Not the Helen I knew. Not the Helen I was.

"You...you don't remember. You're saying someone else made this copy of you? Marken?"

Helen shrugged and smiled, a malicious glint in her eyes. "Not Marken. That was...a hint, a private joke. You know?"

"A joke? Are you kidding? What about Malley?"

"Malley? I don't know. What's Malley up to?"

"I...I don't know either. I just thought he was...involved." I looked at the bits of vat scattered around the room.

"It doesn't really matter now, about her. She wasn't a part of me, just a copy. Most of me is right here." She tapped her pretty head, still smiling. "Most, but not all. The rest is in you, dear Frank. You and Teef."

The bit of me that was Helen started to squirm inside. What the fuck was she getting at? Where was she going with this?

"The fuck does that matter? Bits of me are inside you, too."

She skinned her teeth, long and thin, and shook her head.

"No, no. Not anymore. Lady Vat helped me out with that. She did some housekeeping in this head of mine. My head is mine again. I was hoping to harvest you and Teef, later on. I should have known you'd find me, though. Such a clever guy, Frank."

I stumbled back. That was little less than murder, to me. Burning out a distributed personality was a personal assault, a tiny death. I raised my gun.

"Fuck you, Helen."

"Uh, no Frank. Fuck you." She clenched her fist. Something snapped inside my head, and I dropped the gun. My muscles turned to jelly, and I folded to the floor. I could feel my augmented mind screaming through crash subroutines, fighting back whatever the bitch had planted. I remembered the cold steel on my face as I lay facedown next to Elsa, and thought of nano-injected code and hijacked nervous systems. I passed out just before my face hit the ground.

I woke up in the burning arms of retrovirus. Sterling silver teeth of code chewed through my brain, breaking me down and tearing me apart. I felt like a cadaver, dissected, cold and laid out for examination. The fever was like hot lead swimming through my eyes.

"Little boy Frankie's up?" – a voice – "Good boy."

I stretched and reached from the depth of my fever. My arms, I found, were held in place. I opened burning eyes and saw a





bed, and rope, and a twisted coil of sheet between my legs. I was shivering.

"The medicine has your attention, Frank?" she asked. I turned painfully, the ropes cutting into my wrists, and saw Helen. Helen, magnificent and mad, reclining in a thrashed sofa chair on the other side of the room. She wore a summer dress, the floral print stained and faded, pulled up high on her thighs. I tried to remember what she had been wearing, earlier, in the dazzling brightness of the flare. It slipped from my mind, crumbled apart until the only thing I could remember was pain as the gun tumbled from my hand.

Helen was sweating mightily, her legs and arms and the wide scoop of her chest shining bright with perspiration. She was smoking a cigarette, the air around her ringed in a greyish haze.

"That's me, babydoll. Burning out of you. Phoenix, angel, burning white hot outta your goddamn head, Frank. Don't mind so much, do you?"

I couldn't answer. My mouth was fever struck and dry. I yammered against the virus, then settled back into the bed. The room was dancing around me, the walls and ceiling pinwheel free and loose around my head. I thrashed and saw something tangled and wet in the corner. Bits of meat, a tank, a jumble of tubes and network wiring.

"Memories of Peter," Helen said. "He hasn't been as much trouble as you. He's been such a dear."

The red eye of Helen's cigarette floated through the corner of my vision, a devil's eye wandering high and low. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open, to keep my head from spinning out of control. After a few minutes she stubbed her cigarette out. We sat in almost darkness as the storm of virus roared through my head. The floor creaked, there was a shuffle of clothing, then a yellow flash as Helen lit up again.

I turned my head to look at her. For a moment her jaw was washed in the soft light of the butane flame, and my sick mind jumped back to candlelight and bottles of wine. We'd spent a day in the California mountains, an old rented car that had broken down, a meal under towering stars. All that old junk. She snapped the lighter shut and the memory collapsed. I was alone again in this cheap room, tied to the bed, my mind on fire. Helen leaned down into the trashy floor and picked up a revolver, oily and dark. The handle was wrapped in masking tape.

"Do you know, Frank, why you're here? Why it is we've come to this?" She circled the room with the barrel of the revolver.

I tried to shake my head, but could only get it to flop meagerly. My throat was whimpering.

"Was that a no? No, you don't know? Really? Or are you just scared, Frankie?" Her fingers grabbed my chin and held my head still. The room continued shivering over her shoulder. Vertigo rode a hot ticket up my spine.

Helen stood leaning over the bed, cigarette in one hand and pistol in the other. The cigarette I remember from early in our relationship. Something I'd made her give up before the distribution. Didn't want the nasty hook of nicotine cutting its way through all my bodies.

The pistol, though, was new. She was uneasy with it, like someone on stage for the first time, trying to figure out what to do with their hands. It was too dense and serious by far to be held in those delicate fingers.

"You're here, Frank, because of fucking Elsa. Because. Fucking. Elsa." And she thumped my belly with the barrel of the gun, like she was bouncing a quarter off a drum. She dropped her cigarette onto the floor and started to circle the room.

Maybe, I thought, Helen has gone crazy. Surprised it didn't occur to me earlier. Must have been the virus. Having your brain

burned in half can get messy.

Helen stalked, and she smirked. Her eyes were crazy lady with a shopping cart wide. Her fingers were thumping on her thigh, a staccato bass line of nerves and energy. This was not Helen, not at all, not the cool, the pro, the solid as rock operator.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Frank? Lookin' at dyin', Frank? Lookin' Mr Deadeyes in the old kisser, is that it, Frank?"

Even wrapped in the sweltering blanket of fever, it was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard. I began to wonder about this, about how Helen had said the vat had helped her clear her mind. I began to wonder if that had been voluntary, if this current state had been the intended product of that little operation. Maybe the virus, this virus, the one cutting through my head right now, maybe it had destabilized her, more than a little. That can happen, I know. Radical personality reconstruction can fuck you but good, especially if it's done wrong. Maybe the Helen I knew had fallen apart under the strain, fallen apart and come back together as this silly, wild eyed freak waving a gun at me right now. And looking at the gun, I decided that I had more important things to worry about just now. I cringed and started struggling my way out of the bed. This amused my dear Helen greatly.

"Hey, that's good. The great escape, is it? You're gonna dig your way out of here with a spoon, right? Maybe you wanna try sweet-talking the guard, Frank?" She put one foot on the bed, next to my thigh, then cranked her hips open. "You wanna fuck your way to freedom, Frank, you little goddamn monster?"

And that was it. That was the fucking end. Not because I couldn't take it anymore, or because Helen finally snapped and put a bullet into my teeth. No, that was the end because that was when a real monster, an honest to god horrorshow, ended it.

He started out as a swelling, a lump in the ceiling. While Helen shook her hips and I gaped, this lump bubbled, until a quiet slab of ceiling peeled back like a soap bubble bursting. Through the hole came a horrible thing, long thin black arms, slick and hard, like demons tearing free of mother hell. He unfolded into the room, a particularly clever puzzlebox, fingers and toes and long scissoring arms. His torso was misshapen, thin where it should be strong and bulging where it should be flat. There were angles of flesh that had nothing to do with biology. He had been born a man, at some distant past, but he had been thoroughly remade, broken and bonded and beaten into something less like a man, and something more like a shadow. His head bulged out to one side, swollen with intricate science. Eyes that were nothing like eyes, nothing like windows or cameras or lenses. Dull, dead, shadow eyes, eyes like teeth.

Helen never heard him, though she should have known. His hand reached out, too many fingers, too thin, joints upon joints, unfolding and growing. She never saw it, until his hand closed around her head like a spider nimbly pouncing on its meal. Teef.

He untied me and gathered me up. The cold plate of his face brushed my cheek, and he buzzed into my ear. Going home, I'm going home, to bury Helen and to remember her. To carry on being her, as well, at least inside. Teef stooped and carried me outside into the hot summer night. Distantly the hollow sounds of country music drifted down the street, mingling with the static of my SenseNet connection, and the moaning of ghosts in my head.

Tim grew up in deeply rural North Carolina, but has spent about half his life near Chicago. He is the last in a long line of gold prospectors, bank managers, tourist trap barons, newspaper editors and theologians. He is trying to do them all proud at once, with mixed results. His electronic self can usually be found at dead-channel.net



# INTERMISSION

STORIES • THE NEW CHINESE WIVES by WILL McINTOSH • ILLUSTRATED by JESSE SPEAK

## WILL McINTOSH

## THE



Will McIntosh has published two previous stories in *Interzone*, including 'Soft Apocalypse' which was shortlisted for the British Science Fiction Award for best short story of 2005 and which at the time of writing is also in the running for a British Fantasy Award. We have more from Will soon, and also look out for 'The Fantasy Jumper' in *Black Static*. By day Will is a psychology professor in the southeastern US.



# NEW CHINESE WIVES

The ceremony was held in the park, at twilight, in a black bamboo garden backset with a serene bronze Buddha and glowing stone lanterns.

"How can you pretend that something is real when it's not?" Hai hissed to his wife, Yo Wen. "This is a perversion."

Yo Wen shushed him.

Hai sighed loudly, but said nothing.

His son's New Wife was escorted into the garden by their 'marriage counselor'. It was the first time Hai had seen her. She was beautiful, of course – her face a perfect oval, her eyes tilted almonds; long, narrow nose, small red lips. She was short (the perfect size, of course, for a man the size of Jian) and slim, her shapely calves just visible through the gossamer fabric of the wedding dress.

More than her looks, it was the way she walked that stood out. She walked like a brook flowed, so graceful – calm and energetic both. Like a model on a catwalk. How substantial she seemed. Her veil truly seemed to ripple in the breeze as she exchanged promises with Jian.

Jian stood beside her, his hands dangling like dead fish. A muscle in his acne-scarred cheek twitched endlessly, and his mouth curled at the edges not in a smile but in a sort of spasm. Hai wondered how many pain pills he'd taken for his bad back before the ceremony. He was only going through with this because of the promise of a disability pension – he'd made that clear enough. Then he could lie in bed all day and eat pain pills.

The strangeness of it all pelted Hai like a bitter, musty flavor he had never before tasted. His son was *marrying* this...this emptiness. Better he marry a popsickle stick. At least it was real.

Hai scanned the guests' faces, seeking evidence of what he felt, but saw only warm smiles, and occasionally tears. They were all diligently following the New Wives are Persons law.

Only Jian's son Ch'an looked unhappy, hanging toward the back of the gathering, staring at his feet. But then, Ch'an always looked unhappy. He'd added another ring to his neck: there was no question now, it was longer than normal. He looked like a giant stork. He was wearing five or six shirts, the ever-present phone dangling from the utility-belt-thing that all the kids wore.

Hai should call a halt to this, he knew. But no one would listen to an old man.

*You eat much bitterness when you're old.*

The thought had a strange, familiar echo. Who used to say that – you eat much bitterness when you're old? When Hai thought it, it wasn't in his voice. Whose voice was it?

People out for a walk in the park stood on the stone sidewalk in their blue jeans, watching, whispering, pointing. They could tell it

was a New Wife, one of the first in Shanxi's oldtown neighborhood.

Amidst the onlookers, a homeless man lay on a bench, his face wrapped in a towel to block the fading light, a shopping bag curled against his belly, a wide empty rice bowl tipped upside-down by his head. Hai could almost believe he'd been placed there on purpose, a reminder to Jian of how he might end up if he did not join the New Wife program.

His grandfather. That was who used to say that.

Sixty years ago he used to take Hai to the newsstand and buy him comic books. He used to say it all the time, in that tired, earnest voice. Used to drive Hai nuts. Yeah, yeah, tough getting old. Hai had just wanted the comics, otherwise he wouldn't have spent time with the boring old man, with his old-fashioned ways. Always Mao-this and Mao-that.

Now he got it, the full weight of that simple statement. You eat much bitterness when you're old. You really do.

When the ceremony was over, Hai stepped up and congratulated his son. He had little choice with so many guests and strangers watching.

Wei Bong, the marriage counselor, introduced Hai and Yo Wen to their new daughter-in-law, Lin. His hand was curled over Lin's elbow so skillfully that it created the perfect illusion of touch.

The little round bone in Lin's slim wrist seemed so real; three points of light reflected off it, one from each stone lantern.

"Hello mother and father. It is my pleasure to meet you," Lin said softly, dipping her head, her eyes never meeting theirs. She held a bouquet of white roses. "From now on, I am your daughter." It was the perfect thing for a daughter-in-law to say to please new parents.

Hai exchanged a few platitudes with Lin, feeling like a perfect idiot, and drew away as soon as it was polite.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Yo Wen said as they stood at a distance with painted smiles.

Hai grunted.

"It's for the best. A man needs a wife," Yo Wen said.

"He's marrying a television picture!" Hai hissed.

"Be quiet! Do you want to end up in prison?"

Hai stretched his aching back, looked up into the cinnamon tree shading them. Weak sunlight flashed through windblown leaves. A New Panda sat munching a virtual bamboo shoot on a low branch, its white fur tinted blue by the light of a video screen mounted higher in the tree. The extinct bears were the only things the government allowed to be projected with the new technology, besides wives. Hai wondered if there would soon be a law forbidding people to question how those branches could possibly support four-hundred pound bears. It was coming, surely. It was no



more absurd than the New Wives are Persons law.

On the video screen a beautiful woman was eating a rice cake while the manufacturer's logo flashed like a firecracker.

"Think of your son," Yo Wen prodded as Hai continued to stare into the tree. "He will finally be respected again. He'll be a married man." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "All his problems stem from that. Before Yousha died, he didn't have these problems. And the disability pension – you can stop working now! We'll die knowing our son won't be alone –"

"He *will* be alone!"

Yo Wen shushed him.

The guests were filing through the pagoda-styled gate into the Flowering Days Restaurant. Hai and Yo Wen crossed the street and joined the queue. Hai eyed the porridge and noodle shop a few doors down, today's menus propped on the cobbled sidewalk, doors flung open showing familiar powder blue ceramic tiles. He wished he could go in there instead.

Inside Flowering Days, the walls were decorated with the traditional character for double-happiness, flanked by a splendid spiral dragon representing the groom, and an elegant Feng Huang bird, its plumage as vivid as an artist's palette, representing the bride.

The Tengs, who lived in the unit beside theirs, approached and congratulated them. They were very good actors, Hai observed. You would never know that this was their first time pretending that a glorified television picture was a real person. Perhaps they were smiling out of relief that their son had a wife he could touch. Sure, one of her front teeth was black and her nose was too broad, but she bled when you pricked her with a needle.

"**S**hall I take off my dress?" Lin said.

"All right," Jian said, his words slurred from the painkillers.

The walls were so thin that Hai could hear the soft whisper of the fabric sliding across Lin's skin.

"I curse Mao for this," Hai whispered to Yo Wen.

Yo Wen shushed him, but he ignored her.

"Everyone have children," he ordered. So we have overpopulation. 'Only one child,' he said, 'that will fix the problem.' And of course everyone wanted sons, so now there are not enough women –"

"Make yourself comfortable," Lin said through the paper wall. "Would it please you if I touched my breasts?"

"The government is doing this because they know that men who can't find wives are unhappy men. Angry men," Hai whispered. "The Wife Riots in Chongjing rattled them. This is their solution."

Hai was surprised Wei Bong, the 'marriage counselor,' wasn't in the bedroom with the newlyweds, providing sex lessons. He had barely left their side all day, and had arranged to return tomorrow morning. Yes, the government desperately wanted this program to be successful. But how could it be? New Wives couldn't bear children; they were hollow fillers, they were absurd jokes.

"We should make love," Yo Wen said. "The noise will give them privacy, so they can enjoy their wedding night."

"It's not a wedding night! He's masturbating to a three-dimensional picture!"

"Don't call it that! It's New Sex."

Yo Wen took his hand, pressed it against her soft, loose, old woman's breast. Hai felt the warmth of it, felt the rubbery bulge of her nipple, and for a moment thought of Lin's breasts. He pushed the image out of his mind, concentrated instead on his own hand, lit by moonlight spilling through the window. When had the skin on it become so loose and age-spotted?

The skin on his grandfather's hands had been a tight weave of stiff white strips, like they were covered in melted wax, as he counted out yuan on the linoleum counter to pay for Hai's comics. Burn scars. Back during World War II he'd opened a big steel door down in his company's basement, where they were storing black market gasoline. The door had caused a spark, and his grandfather had spent a year in the hospital, getting scoured every day with steel wool to keep the burns from getting infected.

"The last wise man," Hai muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" Yo Wen asked.

"Nothing."

Through the wall, Lin whispered soothing nothings to his son.

**W**hen Lin plucked food from the bowls in the center of the table, there was a moment of transition when the illusion was not perfect. It was very subtle, just a little *skip* as a piece of virtual pork or pickled ginger materialized at the tip of her chopsticks, but Hai could see it. He also could see a slight skip in Lin, when she stepped through a doorway and the satellite began projecting her image instead of the communication cables that ran through their house, supplying them with three-dimensional TV and internet. He held on to these imperfections, a reminder of the chasm between what was real and what was a lie.

"Are you enjoying it, Jian? Your mother is such a wonderful cook," Lin said.

Jian nodded without looking up.

Lin brushed strands of her long, silky hair away from her mouth, then took a bite. She sighed. "I'd so enjoy helping you mom, if it wasn't for my – disability."

That's what they were supposed to call it – a disability. As if she were in a wheelchair.

"Oh, it's fine," Yo Wen said. "I enjoy cooking. And having your company in the kitchen is help enough." She adjusted the flame on the ornate kerosene lamp she'd bought for the table just before the marriage.

"You're so kind. How did I get lucky enough to become part of such a wonderful family?" She gazed lovingly at Jian, then at the rest of them one by one. A tear trailed down her cheek.

Jian stared at his bowl, and Ch'an's nose was buried in his phone, but Yo Wen's eyes teared up; she sniffed, smiling at her New Daughter.

Jian went out right after breakfast (probably to find more pills with his newfound disability money), and Ch'an went off to school, and then there were only the three of them. The two of them, and one adult video game.

They went shopping. Hai drove the old segway he'd bought years ago in the junk store, with Yo Wen and Lin sitting in the tow-cart, their feet dangling, the cart's salvaged bicycle wheels wobbling crazily.

Again he was reminded of his grandfather, gripping the handles of his bicycle with his thick, numb palms, Hai clinging to the back of his windbreaker.

It occurred to Hai that, being so wise, his grandfather must have realized that Hai had only been willing to put up with his rambling because he bought Hai comic books. It had never occurred to Hai to wonder what his grandfather got out of the exchange, but now he realized it must have been his company.

At a red light a mangy blonde dog trotted past them, stopped to pee on a street lamp, disappeared around the corner.

Hai would give anything to have five more minutes with his



grandfather, who he was now certain had been the last wise man. He would know what to do about all this.

The light turned green and Hai continued, passing little shops, all crowded together one after another, an apartment atop of each one, the silver skyline of downtown Shanxi hovering beyond.

He glanced back to make sure Yo Wen was all right. How unlikely they looked together. Yo Wen, age spots at her temples like smudged thumbprints, frizzed white hair sticking out of a red wool hat. And Lin, looking like a woman on one of the billboards that towered above the streets, her face unlined and impossibly clean, her teeth white and straight, her eyes alert and happy. She was always clean, even walking in the rain. She was wearing pink shoes.

He parked the segway across the street from the grocery house. Crates of Bananas, plums, lichees covered the sidewalk as if they'd spilled out of the store, a red canopy shadowing the inside from view.

The women hopped off the cart. They were giggling like schoolgirls.

"My father had always dreamed of reopening his grandfather's hotel, so, when I was eight, he quit his job at the Consulate, packed our whole family in the car and moved us to Gui Ling. The hotel was a shambles!" Lin waved her hands in the air; Yo Wen howled with laughter. "None of the plumbing worked, termites had eaten most of the wood..."

Yo Wen glanced at Hai, giving him that look that meant "See? She's just like any other person."

The shop owner and two other women hurried to greet Yo Wen and Lin. They were anxious to practice their skills, reaching out to pretend-touch Lin, fawning over her hair and her clothes. One woman thought to air-brush Lin's hair in admiration and accidentally let the tips of her fingers sink right through Lin's cheek. For a moment it looked as if her fingers had been amputated, then they reappeared. Red-faced, the women folded her hands behind her back and kept them there.

Lin lingered outside when Yo Wen went into the store. There were no communication cables in the store.

Hai opened Jian's bedroom door, looking for the keys to the segway. Lin stood beside the dresser in her underpants, a bra in one hand.

"Oh! Excuse me, please," she said, reddening. She draped her free arm across smooth, white, apple-sized breasts. Her nipples were small and taut.

Hai closed the door, embarrassed and shaken. He had lingered a moment longer than was necessary; even now, he couldn't help clinging to the image of Lin's naked body. He hurried into the living room and sat in front of the television. Ch'an was watching a boxing match and playing with his phone. The boxers, bobbing and jabbing a few feet from the couch, looked to be about a foot tall, and they were slightly grainy, not nearly as realistic as Lin.

Hai watched the match, letting the embarrassment drain out of him.

"Shit," Ch'an muttered, reacting to something on the phone's screen, his head bowed. His dyed-white hair was so short in the back that the divot separating his head from his neck was visible. But it was long on top, like a neglected lawn.

Hai felt an imagined hand brush up the back of his own head, against the grain. His grandfather used to do that to him when he wasn't looking. Hai would always jerk his head away and tell his grandfather to stop it. His grandfather would just chuckle.

Hai stared at Ch'an's hair. He couldn't imagine brushing it the

way his grandfather had his.

"Who're you talking to?" Hai asked.

"Just friends," Ch'an mumbled. "Nothing."

*Well don't let me interrupt you,* Hai wanted to say. Rude little rabbit cub. Hai sighed. The room was quiet, except for Ch'an's tapping.

"Oh, baaalls," Ch'an whined.

"What?" Hai said. Half of the words the boy spoke were bastardized English or Spanish. Hai knew the English word, but couldn't imagine what it was meant to convey.

Ch'an just shook his head. He almost looked like he was going to cry.

"Come on, what?"

Ch'an started to answer, stopped, pressed the bridge of his nose.

"My pop rating keeps going down."

"What's a pop rating?"

Ch'an snickered, shaking his head – a 'what a stupid old man' gesture. Hai saw more of them every day. In his grandfather's time, elders were given respect. Not any more.

"There's this net host called Raterunner where you can rate everyone, you know, on how much you like them. How popular they are. Kids with the highest pop ratings get all this great stuff sent to them for free, from companies who want other kids to see them using it, so they'll buy it too."

"You're telling me there's a number that tells you how much people at school like you?"

Ch'an nodded.

"What kind of world is this?" Hai wrinkled his nose, as if he were smelling the notion.

One of the boxers was down on one knee, clinging to the ropes. The other danced nearby, waiting.

"What makes kids popular?" Hai asked.

Ch'an shrugged. "Mostly clothes. Who you carry on with...who your parents are. But mostly it's clothes."

"I imagine it doesn't help that your step-mother is a New Wife."

Ch'an stared at him as if he'd just observed that rocks are hard.

"Is that why your pop rating is going down?"

Ch'an closed his eyes and rotated his neck; the rings scraped and clacked. "What do you think?"

Hai nodded thoughtfully. It had never occurred to him that Ch'an was as unhappy with the situation as he was.

"I don't like it either," he said. Ch'an looked surprised. He must have noticed that Hai disapproved of Lin; perhaps he was surprised that Hai had admitted it aloud, to him.

"Want to take a ride?" Hai asked.

The words echoed in his head, only in his grandfather's voice. *Want to take a ride?* When his grandfather had said it, it had always meant *Want me to buy you something?* Hai could almost see him standing there, hands hidden in the pockets of his grey jacket, crooked yellow bottom teeth jutting in a pronounced underbite. Not many people had crooked teeth any more, or buck teeth. It took a lot of the character out of faces.

"What? Why?" Ch'an said, sounding annoyed. He went back to his phone.

"I don't know. Is there anything you need?"

Ch'an stopped typing. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's something you need, that we could get." Hai shrugged.

"How much are they?" Hai asked, eyeing the monstrous pants Ch'an was modeling in front of a tri-fold mirror. He had to



shout it to be heard over the so-called music, which sounded like two people having sex while fingernails scraped across a blackboard.

"Eight hundred."

"Eight hundred? You must be joking!" The pants were inside out, with big external pockets that hung down to Ch'an's knees. And they were backward – they zippered on his ass.

"Fine. Forget it." Ch'an stormed into the dressing room.

"I knew you were just bullshitting. Why'd I let you waste my time?" Ch'an shouted from inside.

"Do you have any sense of how much eight hundred is? I cut people's hair for five days to make that much!"

"Fine. Just get lost, okay? If anybody saw me here with you, my pop rating would zero out."

"Fine. I wouldn't want to embarrass you!" Hai headed for the doors.

*Fine*, he heard his grandfather say. He stopped walking, stupidly thumbed through a rack of clothes. He couldn't even tell if they were pants or shirts.

The last time Hai had seen his grandfather, they had an argument. He didn't remember what it was about, but he was fairly sure it was the only one they ever had. His grandfather had said something like "Maybe I won't take you to the store any more, how would you like that?" And Hai had said "Fine." And his grandfather had said "Fine," and walked away, and died of a heart attack a few hours later, in his little room in the back of their house that faced the alley, probably watching soap operas. When Hai heard, he sat in his room all day, looking at his comic books and crying.

A young woman wearing silver reflective sunglasses, strawberry-colored lipstick, and an orange scuba-vest was staring at him from behind the counter. She was beautiful, but he was sure she was real, because she looked conceited, and not terribly happy.

The only thing Hai liked about this store was the smell. It smelled like spring – blooming flowers and sprouting leaves. Not a sticky-sweet artificial spring smell, it really smelled like spring. It was probably to sell more clothes, but it was nice. Ch'an came out with

colorful fish swimming inside them; pets on leashes that were not dogs or cats, or any animal Hai knew of. New Pets, but real.

It all depressed Hai; it was like stepping into the future. Only it was the present, and when Hai went home to his neighborhood, he'd be stepping into the past. It must be difficult for Ch'an, to live in the past, but go to school in the present.

On the way out of the subway they passed an old woman, her hair a shock of white, struggling to get up the long staircase. She leaned on the railing, resting every step.

"Hold on," Hai said.

Ch'an, who was a couple steps in front of him, stopped.

"Come on." Hai went back down, took the old woman's arm. The woman looked at him, smiled, nodded. Ch'an stared like Hai had lost his mind. He fumbled with his phone.

"Take her other arm."

Reluctantly, Ch'an complied.

At the top of the steps, the woman patted each of their arms, like a nanny consoling a child, and went on her way.

"What are you trying to do to me? My phone's eye was on. My friends could have seen!"

"They saw you helping the old lady?"

"No, I turned it off as soon as you stopped. But they could tell what was happening."

"Sorry. I know your pop rating is more important than that old lady not breaking her hip falling down the stairs. My mistake."

He couldn't wait to get this selfish ingrate home. He'd just spent eight hundred yuan, and this was his thanks.

How had his grandfather put up with it, buying him things and barely getting a thank you? Never a word, never a complaint until that last little argument.

Pants. Their lives revolved around wearing the right kind of zipper-on-the-ass pants.

Of course, his grandfather hadn't thought much of his comic books. He'd always shook his head as he carried them to the cash register, saying "I don't understand it, but if this is what you want..."

"You eat much bitterness when you're old," Hai said.

"Yeah," Ch'an said. Contempt and sarcasm saturated the syllable. Probably because of

the old Chinese construction of the phrase as much as the sentiment.

"Just remember that. It may make sense one day."

On the sidewalk in front of their apartment Ch'an went off to find his friends. Hai stared for a moment at the concrete wall of the building, chipped and scarred, at places worn down to the steel wire framing underneath. He opened the front door, calling "Hi ho" to let Yo Wen know it was him, as he always did. He popped his shoes off.

There was a woman sitting at the table, drinking tea with Yo Wen and Lin. She looked to be in her fifties, her hair greying. Hai didn't recognize her.

"This is Chien-Ru," Yo Wen said. "She's an acquaintance of Jian's." Yo Wen did not look pleased.

The woman nodded, smiling. An acquaintance of Jian's? She was a woman, and fifteen years older than Jian. It didn't make much sense. A drug dealer? She didn't look like a drug dealer; from the look of her clothes, she was even poorer than they were.

"Hello, father," Lin said. Hai ignored her. Yo Wen kept telling him he was hurting Lin's feelings by ignoring her, and he kept reminding her that Lin had no feelings.

He sat down, and Yo Wen poured him tea. They exchanged polite

the pants.

"Here," Hai said, holding out a hand, "give them to me." He took them to the counter and paid for them, peeling off bills. The woman with the sunglasses stared at the bills as if he were giving her cabbage; she would prefer he pull a phone off a utility belt and punch some numbers to pay.

He handed the bag to Ch'an, who said thank you and bowed slightly. Hai could tell that he was trying his best to say it nicely, without any sarcasm.

Ch'an asked Hai to wait while he ducked into the mall's bathroom and put on the pants. Hai shoved aside the stupid proud feeling he got because he'd been the one who bought them.

A dozen smells wafted out of the stores as they passed – campfires...cucumbers...something animal, like puppies' feet. It was one of the few new things that Hai actually liked. He mentioned it to Ch'an, but Ch'an didn't seem to notice it, or just wasn't interested.

Outside Hai was again assaulted with the steel and glass shine of downtown Shanxi: roads of new unbreakable plastic-looking material, sometimes stacked four and five high so you couldn't see the sky; a building with towering glass walls filled with water, with



talk until they heard Jian at the front door. Yo Wen stood, then Chien-Ru stood, so Lin followed suit. Only Hai remained seated, watching curiously, smiling inside at this strange and awkward scene. He thought he had figured out who Chien-Ru was.

Jian went white when he saw Chien-Ru. "Oh, hello," he said.

And in that moment Hai was certain. This woman was his lover! Twenty two years after Yousha's death, Jian had met a woman. A real woman. She was old, and not good-looking, probably a widow, but still a woman. Hai was thrilled. Now they could end this charade.

The sores on his family were healing, Hai realized. First Ch'an, now Jian. His grandfather would be pleased.

"**Y**ou're a *married man*!" Yo Wen screamed as soon as Jian returned from wherever he had gone with Chien-Ru. "She's old and ugly! You have such a young, beautiful wife!" Yo Wen gestured toward Lin, who sat smiling at the table. It wasn't a forced smile, or a jealous smile; it was just a smile. Her range of emotions was very limited.

"She's *real*. He can *touch* her," Hai said. Jian looked relieved to discover someone on his side. "How did you meet her?" Hai asked him.

Jian looked at the floor. "Wei Bong insists I go for character-building instruction. He thinks I take too much medicine. Chien-Ru is in my class."

"Why was she sent to the class?"

Jian shrugged. He probably knew, but didn't want to give Yo Wen new ideas for criticism. Hai guessed it was alcohol, or perhaps prostitution.

"You cannot do this!" Yo Wen persisted. "What about your disability pension?" She was talking in front of Lin as if Lin were a television picture, not a young wife. The illusion was breaking down.

"It's not certain yet that we'll marry," Jian said.

"You're *already* married."

No one said anything.

When Ch'an came home, Hai asked him to go for a walk, and told him what was happening. He was old enough to know.

**W**ei Bong was at the door early the next morning, requesting a private counseling session with the couple. Hai didn't know if Yo Wen had called him, or if it was true what people whispered, that the counselors could watch through New Wives' eyes to see if anyone broke the New Wives are Persons law. Hai and Yo Wen went to their room so they could listen.

Wei Bong began as usual, asking each in turn if they were happy. Lin responded with an enthusiastic yes. Jian grunted noncommittally. Wei Bong pressed Jian, asking if Lin was ever disrespectful, or denied him his conjugal privileges, or failed to keep herself clean and attractive. Each time, Jian answered that she had not.

"Then let me remind you that you are a married man," Wei Bong said pointedly, "and under the law you may not divorce a New Wife unless she is disrespectful, slovenly, or unfaithful."

Which, of course, could never happen. The government always got their way. They claimed no one had died in the Wife Riots, but Hai's brother Cheuk, who lived downstream from Chongjing, said the river flowed pink for thirty minutes after the riots. Just once, Hai would like to see them eat bitterness.

"A New Wife cannot be dishonored through infidelity," Wei Bong continued. "She is a glorious shining emerald that cannot be dropped in a muddy gutter. A spouse who dishonors a New Wife through disgraceful behavior disgraces China, and will be punished."

The threat sent a chill through Hai. They would do it, too; they would toss Jian in jail for cheating on their chimera.

"In any case, you're ruining your chances for children." Beside Hai, Yo Wen gasped.

There had been whispers of children for New Wife couples. Hai prayed the government was not thinking of unleashing little child video pictures on them as well. More likely they would steal second babies away from parents who broke the one child law, adding a new abomination to their bag of tricks.

When Wei Bong, with his big nose and bigger glasses, finally left, Yo Wen insisted the whole family go to the park – even Ch'an. No doubt an attempt to tighten the family knots that were loosening.

It was a beautiful afternoon; the park was filled with throngs of people bargaining and talking, eating noodles and drinking Coca-Cola on blankets spread on the grass. Vendors grilled meat on spits, sending smoke wafting into the trees; the smoke danced with the blue light from the video screens.

Hai took Yo Wen for a walk; it was time to lay his tiles on the board.

"I admit it, the wedding made sense. Jian had no choice." They stepped around a fake panda sprawled against a stone lantern like a drunken sailor. Whoever controlled the images was already getting sloppy. "But why do you insist on taking part in this charade? Folding your own eyes, and speaking lies, pretending that you don't know the truth?"

He half expected Yo Wen to shush him, but after fifty-three years of marriage she knew when it was time to shush and when it was time to talk.

Yo Wen wrapped her arm into his and sighed.

"You care about the truth when you have hope that things will change. In China, there is no hope, so it's best to accept the lies. It allows me peace. A thousand years of meditation won't bring you peace if you insist on only the truth."

Hai looked at Yo Wen's deeply wrinkled face and smiled. Perhaps the last wise man died when he was a boy, but there was still one wise woman.

They walked in silence, arm in arm, enjoying the warm sunlight, the comforting cacophony of the park. Yo Wen stopped at a table to look at hand-painted fans. The woman, who had fat cheeks as red as autumn apples, also sold bootleg movies and Avon products.

"Look," Yo Wen said, pointing. "Another New Wife."

She was sitting on a bench with an older woman, her legs crossed, long hair in flowing braids. She was, of course, very beautiful.

Yo Wen introduced herself, and invited the wife and her mother to meet Lin and Jian.

The four of them crossed the grass, Hai lagging slightly behind Ch'an had gone off, leaving Jian and Lin alone. Lin sat cross legged, the edges of her long white skirt spilling into the grass. Jian had finished almost the entire bottle of wine they'd brought. He was scowling, and swaying slightly.

Hai watched the two New Wives laugh and compliment each other as he would watch a bloody bicycle accident: sickened, and from a distance. They discovered they had both grown up in Shanghai, and perhaps Hai should have known what was coming next.

"My father was an aid to the Ambassador of New Zealand," the other New Wife said. "But he always dreamed of one thing: returning to his ancestral home of Gui Ling and reopening the traditional family business, an old hotel!"

Yo Wen's face went white, but she held her smile, although it trembled at the edges. The other mother beamed, obviously proud of her daughter.



"...so when I was eight, my father left the Consulate, packed our whole family in the car and moved us to Gui Ling," the New Wife continued. Suddenly Yo Wen was clutching Hai's elbow much too hard. "The hotel was a shambles! None of the plumbing worked..."

Lin clapped delightedly "What a coincidence! My father was also an aid to the Ambassador of New Zealand! And *his* family also had a hotel."

Jian burst out laughing. The other mother gasped, her hand over her mouth. Yo Wen excused herself and hurried away; Hai followed, struggling to keep up. She stopped behind a copse of trees and burst into tears.

"What have I done..." she sobbed as Hai patted her hand.

"It's not your fault. We all went along."

Yo Wen cried harder; Hai wrapped his arms around her shoulders, shushing her gently.

"They must have developed a catalogue of memories that they use over and over to keep the costs down," Hai said, as much to himself as Yo Wen, who seemed beyond listening.

She cried in Hai's arms for a few moments, then, in true Yo Wen fashion, began to pull herself together.

"She's so *stupid*. How could she think it was a coincidence?" she said.

"She's not stupid, she's a program...a machine. There is no she."

Yo Wen nodded. Hai was glad they were back on the same side. He led her back toward the blanket.

The other New Wife and her mother were nowhere in sight. Ch'an was back, sitting a dozen feet away from Jian and Lin. Lin said something sweet and devoted to Jian, who stared at Lin with contempt. She reached out and gestured a tickle under his chin.

"Why don't you turn yourself off?" He shouted, jerking his head away as if she could really touch him. He hurled his cup of wine at her face. It passed through her and splashed in the grass, spraying a blood red stain across the blades.

A woman with a baby on her shoulder gasped, and whispered to her husband.

"Let's go," Hai said to Yo Wen. He hurried over to Ch'an and told him to pack everything up. Without a word Ch'an sprung into action.

*Inhale.*

*What would grandfather think of this beautiful, deadly cancer I've let into our family? I should have tried harder to stop the marriage.*

*Exhale.*

Ch'an tapped on his phone. Once this might have angered Hai, but now it didn't. Ch'an was wearing the pants he'd bought him, and the shirt he'd bought him, and the tennis shoes with the built-in sound-effects. He even kept Hai updated on his pop rating. It was going lower, despite the new clothes. His classmates referred to Lin as his Video Mother.

*Inhale.*

*We were so close to healing our wounds.*

A truck rattled by outside. Through the open window Hai caught a whiff of diesel.

*I would kill her if I could. Why not? A chicken on the chopping block suffers more pain than she would. Or a Beetle under a shoe. But she's indestructible. Bullets, poison, fire, none would harm -*

Hai's eyes snapped open. His heart, slowed to a whisper through meditation, began to thump.

*Exhale.*

He stood, walked to the back window, stared out at the narrow cobbled street, empty now except for a lone pigeon pecking at

pebbles. Sheets and clothes hung drying on lines overhead, waving in the wind like the flags of very strange nations. He thought it through carefully. It could work. And there would be no better time than today, right now. Yo Wen was out, so was Jian. Should he wait, consult with Yo Wen?

In his mind's eye he saw his grandfather, his jaw pushed forward, his long, narrow eyes cloudless. Hai was the grandfather now; it was up to him to mend what was broken. He should not risk implicating Yo Wen or Jian. But Ch'an...Hai thought Ch'an had something to gain from playing a part.

"Ch'an? Is your phone's eye on?"

"No. Why?"

"Turn it on, please."

"Why? Is there an old woman who needs to be helped up some stairs?"

Hai smiled, belying his pounding heart. "Trust me. Turn it on, and get some of your friends watching."

Ch'an shrugged, tapped faster. Hai wiped his sweating palms across his pants.

He waited a few minutes, then called Lin.

She appeared out of Jian's room, her hand hovering just above the knob of the open door. "Yes?"

He turned to Ch'an. "Go wait outside. *Right outside.*" He raised his eyebrows. Ch'an looked confused, but he went outside.

Hai stepped over to the kitchen table. With two fingers he gently tipped the kerosene lamp. Kerosene spilled across table, soaking the edge of the newspaper. A stream dribbled onto the wood floor.

"Oh!" Lin said. "There are rags under the sink. Be careful, the fumes might make you dizzy."

The stream slowed to a drip-drip-drip; the kerosene puddled around one leg of the table.

"Yes, I must be careful. One spark could start a terrible fire." He pulled open the kitchen drawer, fished around until he found a box of matches. "My grandfather was burned in a fire. A gasoline fire."

"Oh, that's terrible!" Lin said. She never thought of herself, always concerned about others.

He struck the match; a flame popped to life, blue on the bottom, orange at the tip. Hai stared at it, felt its warmth on his thumb.

"Why don't you sit on the couch," he said. Lin hesitated, then she sat, smoothed her skirt, put her hands in her lap.

"Stay right here. Do you understand?"

She nodded, eyeing the match clutched in his fingers.

He dropped the match onto the table. The tablecloth exploded in flame; the flame climbed down the table leg, burst across the floor.

"**F**ather, why did you do that?" Lin asked. She sounded almost hurt.

"It was an accident," he said. He avoided looking at her.

"Shouldn't you call the fire department?"

"Yes, I'll go do that," Hai said. "You stay right there."

He slipped on his shoes and calmly walked out of the house, the door snicking closed behind him. He pounded on the door of the Tengs' apartment, but no one was home in the middle of the afternoon, as he'd expected. He joined Ch'an, who was leaned up against a lightpost on the sidewalk.

"What?" Ch'an said, trying to read his expression. Hai held up a finger. There was already a hint of smoke in the air.

The front window burst outward in a loud pop.

"Oh my," Hai said. "Our apartment is on fire!" He turned to watch the orange flames dance in and out of the window.



"Oh!" He shouted, holding his palms to his cheeks. "Your mother! She's trapped in the apartment!" He nudged Ch'an in the arm. "Your mother!"

Ch'an looked at Hai as if he'd lost his mind. Then his eyes widened. "Oh. Oh. You didn't." He smiled, and Hai nudged him again.

"Mom!" Ch'an shouted. He feigned running toward the door, but not so fast that Hai couldn't snare the back of his shirt and tug him back.

"Too dangerous!" Hai said. He looked around; people were hurrying from up and down the street, chattering. "Somebody call the police!" he shouted. "My daughter-in-law is trapped inside!"

There were shouts of alarm, and people fumbled in pockets for phones.

"I have a phone," Ch'an said. He called the police. Hai trusted he'd leave the eye on, so his friends would be able to attest to having a continuous feed of the tragedy, to the fact that Lin was in the house just before the fire started.

A young boy walked up clutching a giant mug, staring wide-eyed at the flames spitting out of the broken windows, the smoke pouring from vents in the roof. His head was a yellow moon capped with thin tufts of black hair. He wore baggy little pants, and a soiled tan vest embroidered with Tweety Bird. Hai brushed the hair on the back of his head, against the grain. The boy looked up at him, smiled, letting his mug tilt. Hai reached down to right the boy's mug.

Hai watched the flames leap up the concrete facing, which was already blackened, toward the sloped roof. The apartment was government-owned, but they would likely lose most of their few possessions. It was a small price; he was certain his family would agree.

Wei Bong came running down the sidewalk, still wearing his house shoes.

"Jian's wife was in the house! His wife is dead!" Hai said, doing his best to look distraught.

"What?" Wei Bong said. He glared at Hai, his eyes narrowed. "Lin is dead."

Wei Bong dragged his hand across his mouth, stunned. "No, I think you must be mistaken, I saw her at the market -"

"That's not possible. My grandson," Hai waved to Ch'an, who hurried over, "and all of the friends in his phone saw Lin in the house a moment before the fire started. We heard screams..." Ch'an nodded agreement.

Mrs. Ling from across the street wailed and swooned; Mr Ling caught her, helped her to a seat on the curb. "Poor girl!" Mrs Ling said. She was crying. People were always looking for an opportunity to practice New Wife etiquette. A few of the other women squatted to help console her. Here and there in the crowd, people obediently expressed grief, extolled the virtues of poor Lin, tisked at how young she'd been.

Chien-Ru was old, yes, and not very attractive, but she was a good cook, and she had begun to straighten out Jian even though they were not yet married. His back had improved considerably, and Hai was teaching him how to cut hair.

Hai spent his mornings winding through the poorest neighborhoods on his segway, hauling a swivel chair, mirror, and shears, calling "Cut your hair! Cut your hair!" and rubbing the blades of his scissors together with his free hand.

He was cutting another old man's hair on a sidewalk outside an electronics factory, beside four men playing Ma Jong on an old

school desk, when Wei Bong and a plainclothed police detective pulled up in an electric car. He knew the other man was a police detective because he was wearing interrogation glasses - thick-rimmed steel spectacles that could tell if you were lying.

Hai went on cutting; his customer went on staring into the mirror that Hai had hung on the trunk of a tree whose knotted roots were pushing up sidewalk tiles.

"Mr Hai You?" the detective said.

"That's right," Hai said, knowing from a television show he'd watched that the interrogation glasses were now calibrating his voice from those words, for comparison purposes. What would they invent next?

"Your apartment burned in a fire two weeks ago, is that right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"My name is Inspector Lee. I'm charged with investigating the cause of the fire."

"I started the fire. I burned down my apartment."

His customer stared at him in the mirror as if he had just learned he was having his hair cut by a mental patient. Wei Bong grunted, shaking his head and turning to watch the game, but stayed within earshot.

"I respect your honesty in this matter," Lee said, bowing his head slightly. "I'm afraid I will have to arrest you as soon as you are finished."

"You're arresting me for arson."

"No, I'm arresting you for murder."

Hai's customer stood, reached behind his neck, fumbling with the clip on the orange barber smock.

Hai helped him unclasp it. "No charge," he said as the man hurried away with half a haircut.

"Murder?" Hai sighed. He looked at Inspector Lee. "They never lose, do they?"

Lee shrugged apologetically. "No. I don't think they do." He leaned close to Hai, put a hand on his shoulder. "They have to send a message, so others don't copy you. But you're an old man. A year at most, I'd say."

It started to rain; the men playing Ma Jong hurried to put the game away.

"Are you ready?"

"Can I take my belongings home first?"

"Yes, of course, let me help you." Inspector Lee lifted the chair, set it into the little cart. Quietly, and without looking at Hai, he said "In the break room we laughed until tears rolled down our cheeks."

Hai smiled. "Thank you. Sometimes a desperate situation requires a desperate solution."

As Hai pulled away from the curb, he realized that he'd just said something wise. Something simple and true. He was pleased.

A year. Yo Wen would be distraught, but she was tough as nails, and Chien-Ru would help her through it.

He passed his friend Han squatting beside his little truck, which was stacked high with collapsed cardboard boxes. He waved, and Han waved back.

He wondered if Han would care that he was now a murderer. How strange. Who would have guessed? But he suspected if his grandfather were alive, he would approve. And the more he thought about it, maybe the government hadn't won this time. They could throw him in jail, but they couldn't resurrect Lin. Jian was free to marry, and Ch'an's pop rating was sky-high after his friends watched him help Hai murder his Video Mother. Who knows, maybe they would even allow him to attend his son's wedding. ●







# KAREL'S PRAYER

by CHRIS BECKETT

The first thing Karel Slade noticed when he woke up was an odd smell in his hotel room. It was like the plasticky smell of a new car which has just had the polythene taken off its seats, but with a hint too of something antiseptic, of hospital. And it was entangled in his mind with the mood of a fading dream in which he was drowning or suffocating, or being held down.

The second thing he noticed was that the radio alarm hadn't gone off. It was now 8:00 and his plane home flew at 8:45.

"Shit!" He leapt out of bed naked – a big, broad-chested, athletic man in his late forties, with thick silvery hair – and grabbed the phone to get reception to call him a taxi. But the line, unaccountably, was dead. "I do *not* believe it!"

He pulled on his trousers and headed for the bathroom. But it was locked.

8:03, said the clock as he went to the door of the room and found that locked too. The phone rang.

"Mr Slade, please come to the door of your room."

"It's locked."

"Please come to the door and walk through."

Beyond the door, where the hotel corridor should have been, was a large almost empty room, entirely white, with three chairs in the middle of it. Two of them were occupied by men in suits. The third, a tall straight-backed thing which reminded Karel of a throne – or of an electric chair – was empty.

The two men rose.

One of them, the tall, wiry black man with the gloomy, pock-marked and deeply-lined face, went to the door that Karel had just come through, closed it and locked it. The other, the rotund Anglo-

Saxon with the curly yellow hair and the affable expression, came forward in greeting. "Mr Slade, good to meet you, my name is Mr Thomas. My friend here is Mr Occam."

Karel did not take the extended hand. "Who the fuck are you and what the fuck do you think you're playing at?"

There were those who said that Karel was surprisingly foul-mouthed for a prominent Christian leader, but as he often said to his family and his friends, coarse language might be undesirable but it *wasn't* swearing and had nothing whatever to do with the third commandment. You had to have *some* way of expressing your negative feelings.

"Sit down," said Mr Occam shortly, returning to stand beside his colleague.

Mr Thomas gestured to the throne.

"No," Karel told him. "I don't feel like sitting. I *do* feel like listening to your explanation."

"Sit!" commanded Mr Occam.

"Yes, do sit," said Mr Thomas, "and then we can talk sensibly." He returned to his own chair. He was one of those people who manage to be both plump and nimble. His quick, graceful movements were almost camp.

Karel shrugged, went to the chair and sat down.

With a buzz and an abrupt *click!* shackles came out of the chair legs and fastened themselves around his shins.

"Lay your arms down on the rests," Mr Occam told him.

"What? And have them shackled too?"

The black man approached him. "I will hit you Mr Slade if you don't put your arms on the rests."

Karel did as he was asked.



*Buzz. Click.* The shackles slid into position.

Mr Occam nodded curtly – a taciturn man acknowledging a small courtesy – and took his seat alongside Mr Thomas.

"Now Mr Slade," said the more amiable of the two men, "let's see if we can answer your questions for you. Who the fuck are we? Well, let's just say we work for a government agency. What the fuck are we playing at? That's easy. We're carrying out an investigation. An investigation concerning a terrorist organisation. And we believe you may be able to help us with our inquiries."

Mr Occam gave a small snort. "He is going to help us with our inquiries."

Mr Thomas turned to his colleague gravely. "Do you know what Mr Occam? I think you may be right."

**G**od help me, Karel prayed. He was very, very afraid but trying hard not to show it. *Please God, help me!*

As ever, when he needed it most, his faith seemed to have deserted him. *But we should expect that*, he reminded himself. In the darkness and confusion of a fallen world, we should expect that. After all, if the world wasn't fallen, people wouldn't need belief. They would just know.

*Please God, help me!* he tried again and this time help did seem to come. For a merciful moment he was able to hold in mind that all this was only happening to one man at one particular point in space and one particular moment in time. Beyond this room the world was still the world. And beyond the world, that tiny inconsequential speck, was eternity. The same as it ever was.

"I have rights," Karel said. "You can't detain me and shackle me and question me without a warrant."

"With respect," said Mr Thomas, "I think we've just demonstrated to you that we can."

"But you're breaking the law. You're violating my rights. Sooner or later you'll have to release me, and then this will get out. I'm a prominent man. I head an organisation with more than two million members. I have connections. I..."

"Why do you think we'll have to release you?" queried Mr Thomas.

"Well of course you..." Karel broke off, realising that there were, after all, other theoretical possibilities. "Listen, if I'm not out of here very soon, my family and colleagues will start demanding explanations. And they'll go on until they get explanations. And then you two men are going to be in deep trouble."

"You think so?" Mr Thomas wiggled his head from side to side in the manner of one who weighs the merits of a questionable argument. "Well, who knows? But you should let us worry about that. After all, you've got other things to consider."

"Yes," said Mr Occam. "Like for example your membership of the SHG."

"The Soldiers of the Holy Ghost," said Mr Thomas regretfully, almost as if embarrassed to bring it up, "an illegal terrorist organisation responsible for several hundred deaths over the past five years."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Karel. "I'm Executive Director of Christians for

Human Integrity. It shares some theology with the SHG, yes. But it's an entirely legitimate organisation, properly registered with all the appropriate authorities."

"It's a front for the SHG," stated Mr Occam.

"And you, Mr Slade," his colleague continued, "are a leading member of the SHG's strategic command. Why deny it? You can see for yourself that we know it, so what would be the point?"

While Mr Thomas was speaking, Mr Occam leant forward and stared intently at Karel's eyes.

*Don't try too hard to look sincere*, Karel told himself. It was the mistake that liars always made, like drunkards trying too hard to act sober, like unfaithful husbands trying too hard to appear uxorious, rushing home from their mistresses with chocolates and bunches of flowers. "I do deny it," he said. "I deny it completely. Now let me call my lawyer."

"No, Mr Slade," said Mr Thomas. "That's not going to happen. And *don't* let's go on and on about it, eh? Or it will get so –"

Mr Occam broke rudely across him, leaning forward to bark a question into Karel's face. "Do you deny you support the aims of the SHG?"

"No, I don't deny that. I'm opposed to any form of artificial life or artificial reproduction of life. I'm opposed to artificial intelligence, I'm opposed to cloning, I'm opposed to designer babies and I'm opposed to field-induced copying of human tissues. But it's not a crime to object to tinkering with human identity. Millions agree with me. A majority of the population quite possibly."

"And do you deny that you support the *methods* of the SHG?" asked Mr Thomas.

*Tell the truth whenever possible*, Karel told himself. *The less lies the better.* But he'd need to choose his words carefully. "I believe that their use of violence is in principle justified by the cause. Most

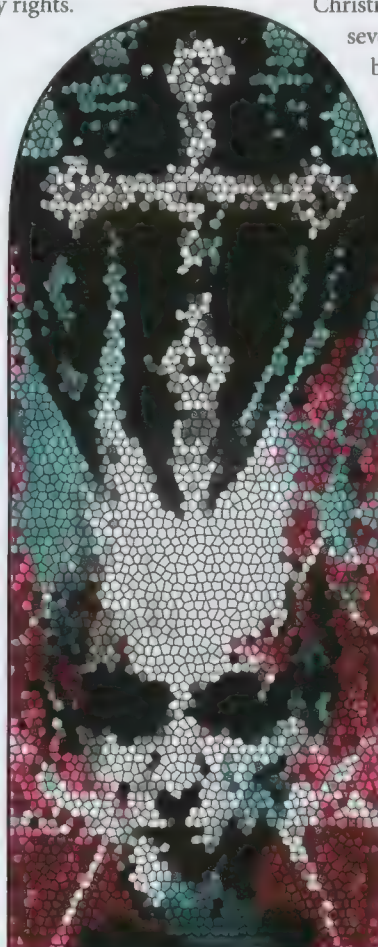
Christians for the last two thousand years – including several members of the present government – have believed that violence in some circumstances is justified. It's the traditional doctrine of the Just War. If Christians can legitimately invoke that doctrine to justify war in defence of purely national interests then they are certainly entitled to invoke it when it comes to defending the integrity of the human person. But that's an intellectual and theological position. It doesn't mean that..."

"You are a member of the strategic command of the SHG," Mr Occam said. "Not intellectual and theological position. *Fact.* You know that. We know that. We're not even going to discuss it. You've been actively involved in funding and master-minding attacks on laboratories and laboratory staff for the past five years at least. What we want from you is names, code words, bank accounts, structures and systems. And you're going to tell us all of them, Mr Slade. One way or the other you're going to tell us the whole lot."

"I'm not, because I don't know them."

"Oh for *Christ's* sake man," grumbled Mr Occam, rising wearily from his chair and hitting Karel very hard across his face.

"You can't *do* that!" Karel yelled at him. He was horrified more than anything by his own baby-like helplessness.





Mr Occam hit him again, this time so hard that the entire chair toppled sideways and crashed to the floor.

*Help me God*, prayed Karel, shackled to the fallen chair. He could feel blood running down his cheek. He could taste the rusty tang of it in his mouth. *Help me remember that this is just pain. It's just something that's happening for a short time to the most temporary part of me.*

They'd had a training course in the SHG – 'Using Faith to Withstand Torture' – and a set of guidelines that they'd instilled into all their members. But they also knew very well that, faced with the agony of the Cross, even the Son of God himself had lost faith for a moment. So they'd set themselves a limited goal: you can't hold out forever but try at least to hold out for one day to give the rest of the organisation time to go underground.

*One day*, Karel thought, *just one day*. That had to be manageable.

The guidelines proposed two stages. Stage A was to stonewall as long as possible, denying all knowledge. Stage B, when the torture got too much to bear, was to give false information. There were various fake addresses and phone numbers which would keep the enemy busy for a few hours, and tip off the people outside that they were under threat...

But for now Karel needed to try and stick to Stage A. Actually, as long as they stuck to hitting, he felt quite confident he could cope. Hitting just hurt. It was only if they got onto needles and blades that he would start to be vulnerable because, brave about most things in life, he was absolutely terrified of being pierced or cut. Always had been. Ever since he sliced open his knee when he was a kid and had looked inside before the blood came rushing down and seen his own white bone.

"Names, code words, bank accounts, structures and systems," repeated Mr Occam. "Starting, *now*, with the names of the other four members of the strategic command group. The real names, not the crappy fake ones that you and your pathetic friends have dreamed up. We know all about Mr French of Dawson Street. We know about Mr Gray of Oldham Road."

Parallel to the floor in his toppled throne, like the fallen king of the beaten side in some old chess set, Karel quailed. Telling them about the fictitious Mr French and Mr Gray had been Stage B. So now there was nothing pre-prepared to fall back on. "I told you," he said, "I don't know any names. I don't even know what the strategic command group is."

*Wham*. Intense pain and nausea. Bright lights in his eyes. Mr Occam had kicked him in the stomach. "Don't *lie* to us you murderous piece of shit. We aren't just guessing here. We *know* you're high up in the SHG. We know that since the death of Leon Schultz, there's no one senior to you in the whole gang."

A sour strand of vomit, mixed with blood, dribbled from the corner of Karel's mouth. The mention of Leon Schultz had shocked him. A wealthy hotelier who had died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack three weeks ago, Schultz had indeed been the leader of the SHG, but Karel had thought this was known only to himself and his four colleagues in the strategic command group.

"Names," said Mr Occam, "*now*!" He kicked Karel again.

"Hey!" protested Mr Thomas, standing up. "Easy, Mr Occam. You're letting it get to you again. Maybe you should take five while I have a quiet word with Mr Slade here?"

"Quiet fucking word be damned," grumbled the black man. "Let's stop pussyfooting around."

It was hard for Karel to see what Mr Occam was doing because he had moved into a part of the room which was nearly above his head,

but there was some kind of cabinet there against the wall, like one of those cabinets with many narrow drawers you get in museums, holding fossils or sea-shells or pressed flowers. Mr Occam was opening and closing drawers, muttering. And then something silvery glittered in his hand and he turned and advanced across the room.

*Oh shit God*, Karel prayed. *Help me please. If you love me God, make him put that back.*

"Come on Mr Occam," said the fat man, standing in front of his colleague and reaching up to lay his hands on his shoulders. "You *know* it's not time for that yet. We need to give Mr Slade a *little* space. A man takes a few minutes to figure out how to get round his entire code of ethics."

Mr Occam made a disgruntled noise.

"Come on man, take five," said Mr Thomas. "You know I'm talking sense."

Mr Occam hesitated and then, to Karel's surprise and huge relief, he nodded. Returning the blade to the cabinet, he strode across the room, opened a door and went out, out into the mythical world which lay beyond these four white walls, its existence almost as hard to believe in now as that of the Kingdom of Heaven itself. The door slammed.

*Ten minutes must have gone by already*, Karel told himself. *Just six times that and I'll already have done one hour.*

"Mr Occam's got all kinds of nasty things in that cabinet there," said Mr Thomas, returning to his seat and leaning forward to peer down concernedly into his prisoner's face. "Knives, razors, pliers, even a blow torch. You know, like one of those little ones people use to make that crunchy caramel crust on a *crème brûlée*? Nice in a kitchen but, man, it *hurts* when you use it like he does, with the vinegar and all. But I think those sort of things should be the very last resort. I'm not a sadist. Maybe I'm in the wrong job but I honestly don't like causing pain."

Karel, the fallen chessman in his sideways throne, said nothing. Of course he had heard of the good-cop bad-cop routine and he understood that a game was being played. But he desperately, *desperately* wanted to keep the good will of the reasonable Mr Thomas and to keep the ruthless Mr Occam at bay.

"Actually," said Mr Thomas, "Mr Occam isn't a sadist either. You should see him with his grandchildren. He's gentleness itself. But he's an angry man, that's the thing. His little brother was maimed by your people, you see. Bomb went off at the lab where he worked. Concrete beam fell on top of him. Legs mashed to a pulp. Had to have them both off at the hip. Girl beside him – nice girl, Gloria: as a matter of fact they were talking about getting married – she was decapitated by the blast. He was trapped in there for an hour and a half next to her headless corpse. Well, need I go on? Just imagine it was your little brother Mr Slade."

Karel said nothing.

"He can't stop thinking about it actually," Mr Thomas said. "You wouldn't believe how it eats him up." He got up with a sigh. "Come on now, let's get you upright. I really shouldn't do this with my bad back, but I just can't talk to a man in that position." With a grunt of effort he levered Karel and his throne back up, then returned to his own seat, puffed and red-faced. "I know you people sincerely believe what you are doing is right," he said. "I know you sincerely believe that what Mr Occam's brother was doing is wrong. But, man, he was working on ways of duplicating human organs for transplants. He was only trying to help. You can see why Mr Occam is angry, can't you? You can see why he feels entitled to hurt you. Your people



didn't seem to care much about his brother's feelings after all."

Karel still said nothing. Intellectually his position was that the SHG should feel no more and no less responsible for the individual tragedies that resulted from their operations than the bomber pilots who helped rid the world of Nazi death camps should feel responsible for the individual tragedies that befell German civilians in the cities they bombed. There would have been mashed legs there as well. There would have been decapitated girlfriends. But he couldn't say that without incriminating himself further. After all, his position was supposed to be that the SHG weren't 'his people' at all. "Yes. I can see why he's angry," he said. "I would be too in his place. But those laboratories, those technologies, they're brewing up all kinds of horrors for the future. They're blurring the boundaries between a human being and a thing. You don't have to be a Christian surely to see that, without that distinction, there..." He broke off. "But I'm not going to change your mind am I?"

Mr Thomas laughed pleasantly. "I'm a public servant, Mr Slade. My opinions are neither here nor there."

"How can you be a public servant if you don't obey the law?"

"Ah, but those are the *written* laws you're talking about Mr Slade, aren't they? Laws for the daylight, laws for the public stage. You've got to bear in mind that every public stage also needs a behind-the-scenes. There's got to be a place where it can be a bit messy and untidy, and where it's okay to leave the ropes and props and bits of scenery lying about. Do you know what I mean? The show's the thing, the show's what it's all about – that's indisputable – but it's behind-the-scenes that keeps it all going." Mr Thomas stood up. "I'll tell you what. Why don't I leave you here to think for a little while? You think about what you could do to help us, and I'll nip out and have a quick word with Mr Occam there, see if I can persuade him to cut you a little bit of slack."

*Fifteen minutes at least, thought Karel, sitting in the middle of the empty room. Get through three more times what I've done so far and that will be an hour ticked off already.*

And it would only be another hour before Caroline realised he wasn't on the plane. She'd know at once that something was wrong. She'd know to inform Matthew using the agreed code. Matthew would set the wheels moving to get everything in the SHG battened down in readiness for the coming storm, and Caroline meanwhile would do the worried wife routine, using all the formidable resources she possessed as a TV celebrity and famous beauty: phoning the TV stations and the international press, phoning lawyers and churches and civil rights groups, emailing the two million members of Christians for Human Integrity. Twenty-four hours? Who needed twenty-four hours? It would be a couple of hours at most before the light of day began to break through into Mr Thomas's 'behind-the-scenes' and Messrs Occam and Thomas began to feel the heat.

It was worrying that they knew about Leon Schultz though. How had they found out? How did they know about Mr French and Mr Gray? What else did they already know?

The door opened. Mr Thomas came back in,

followed by a sombre Mr Occam. They both sat down in their chairs in front of him. It was as if Karel was being interviewed for a job.

"We've decided to give you a bit of information," said Mr Thomas. "Something we've been holding back from you. We think it may help you come to a conclusion."

Mr Occam stood up, walked slowly over to Karel's throne. Karel braced himself for another blow. But instead the sombre black man leant forward and placed his hands on the ends of the chair arms, so that his face and Karel's were no more than a foot apart. "You're not Karel Slade," he said, and for the first time he very faintly smiled.

His breath smelled of tobacco and peppermint and garlic.

"What do you mean I'm not Karel Slade? Of course I am!"

Instinctively Karel looked past the implacable Mr Occam to the accommodating Mr Thomas. But Mr Thomas made the regretful grimace of a person who reluctantly confirms bad news.

"It's very hard to take in I know," he said, "but it's true. You're actually a copy of Karel Slade; you're not Karel Slade himself. In fact the real Karel Slade knows nothing of you at all. He knows nothing of any of this."

Mr Thomas paused like an experienced psychotherapist giving a client some space to process a difficult truth. Karel needed it. He was frozen in the sense that a computer can be frozen when so overloaded with tasks that it can't proceed with any of them.

"Incidentally," Mr Thomas said, "it's actually a lot later in the day than you probably think it is. It's actually early evening. The real Karel Slade got up at 6:30 this morning, caught his plane and is now back with his wife, Caroline. They're at a restaurant with Caroline's brother John and his new fiancée Sue. I believe the meal is in celebration of John and Sue's engagement."

"Not without me, they're not. That was my idea."

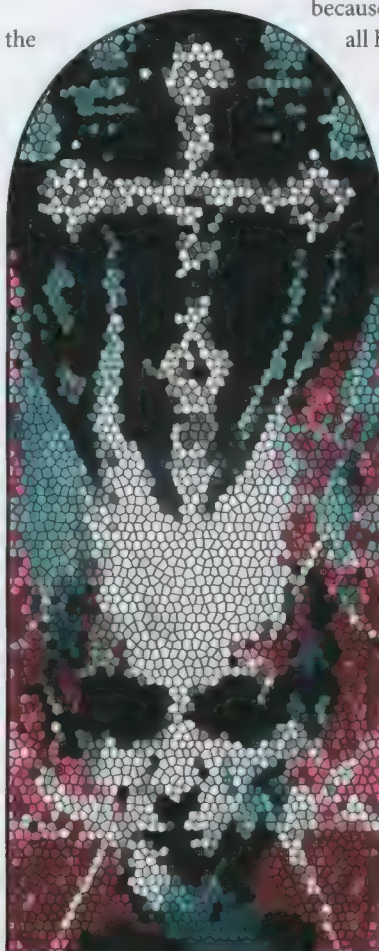
"It was actually Karel Slade's idea. You *think* it was your idea because your brain is an exact copy of Slade's and contains all his memories and thoughts."

"Oh come on," said the man who still believed himself to be Karel Slade, "I can see you're trying to disorientate me, but to suggest I'm some sort of clone is really absurd."

"Not a *clone*," said Mr Occam.

"No of course not," said Mr Thomas. "That *would* be absurd. A cloned copy of you would take forty-eight years to grow – and even then it would only be a body copy of you. It wouldn't have your memories. And it's your memories that we're after." He leaned closer. "No, you're not a clone, Mr Slade, you're a field-induced copy. Last night when Karel Slade got into that hotel bed he didn't know it but he was actually getting into a scanner. The precise imprint of his body on the surface of space-time was recorded, right down to the subatomic level. And then this imprint – this field – was reproduced by an Inducer in the mineral bath from which you eventually emerged. It's a bit like dropping a crystal into a solution. It takes a bit of time, though, which was why we had to tinker with the clocks before we put you back in that fake-up of your hotel room and waited for you to wake up."

Karel knew about the field induction process. Like artificial intelligence and genetically engineered babies, it was one of the things that





Christians for Human Integrity and the SHG were both fiercely opposed to. "But no one's ever copied more than a few cells," he said, "and the government declared a moratorium on the whole thing a year ago, pending the report of the Inter-House Committee on Ethics."

Mr Thomas nodded. "But we're back to what we were talking about earlier, aren't we? About the difference between the public stage and behind-the-scenes? There is a moratorium on field induction research and it's perfectly appropriate in a civilised society that there should be, but behind-the-scenes has its own needs."

"You mean you just went ahead with field-induction in secret?"

"Well we couldn't pass up a technology like that, could we? Not in all conscience. As you pointed out yourself at the beginning of this session, suspects have all kinds of rights – and properly so. They can't be physically hurt. They've got to have a lawyer present. They can't be held for more than a short period of time. It's all very laudable. But we've got a responsibility to protect the public and if we can work with a copy of the suspect, none of those problems need apply. What's more, if we do it right, the suspect and his associates need never even know that we're onto them. Karel Slade for example has no *idea* you're here and that you're about to incriminate him and the entire leadership of the SHG by telling us everything he knows."

"I *am* Karel Slade, and I'm not going to tell you anything about the SHG because I don't *know* anything."

"I know it's hard to grasp. I know it's just too much. But you're not Karel Slade. It's just that you have no other memories except for the ones that were copied from Karel Slade's brain."

"You're a copy," said Mr Occam bluntly. "Get used to it. A couple of hours ago we fished you out of the tank and dried you down with a towel. Two hours earlier you were a lump of meat. Two hours before *that* you were just soup."

"Perhaps it would help to clarify things if we gave you another name," said Mr Thomas. "Let's call you...I don't know...let's call you Heinz."

Mr Occam seemed to find this amusing. "Hey! You always call them Heinz," he complained. "You always call them Heinz or Campbell."

"Not always," protested Mr Thomas. "I sometimes call them Baxter." There was a TV set in the corner of the room. He strolled over to it and switched it on. "Something I'd like to show you, Heinz. We have one of our sleuths at the restaurant where Karel and his wife are dining at the moment. The Red Scallop. Only just opened this week, I understand..."

Karel – or Heinz – could see them on the screen: Caroline, John, Sue round the restaurant table...and Karel Slade, large and voluble, teasing his future brother-in-law about something or other while the women laughed. "This is a fake," he said, "you've done this with computer graphics."

"What, since *yesterday*? It was only yesterday you phoned Caroline and suggested this restaurant, remember? Previously you had a table booked at the Beijing Emperor."

"Somehow you've done it since yesterday."

"Good God Heinz, we're good but we're not *that* good."

"I'm not called Heinz, I'm Karel Slade. And that isn't a live transmission. It's a fake."

"Okay, let's test it," said Mr Thomas. "What's your mobile phone number?"

Karel told him. Mr Thomas punched the number into his own phone and paused with his finger on the CALL button.

On the screen John was replying to Karel's banter. Caroline and

Sue were watching Karel to see how he would react. They were smiling in anticipation. Karel could be a very funny man. Caroline's hand was resting affectionately on his arm.

"Now you tell me when to push the button," said Mr Thomas. "You choose the moment."

In the restaurant Karel was over-acting the outraged innocent in response to whatever John had said. They were all laughing. The waiter had just arrived with the starters.

"Now," said Karel-in-the-throne.

Mr Thomas pushed the button.

Karel-on-the-TV reacted at once. The smile faded to an irritated 'What now?' expression as he felt his jacket pockets for the ringing phone. When Mr Thomas hung up, Karel-on-the-TV examined his phone to see who the call had come from, shrugged, replaced it in his pocket and, muttering something to Caroline in passing, turned his attention back, first to the others and then to the generous plate of seafood in front of him.

Karel-in-the-throne shrugged, as far as a man can shrug when his arms are shackled. "You could do all that with computers. You could easily do all that."

Mr Thomas smiled. "Okay, demonstration number two coming up."

He took out of his pocket a device like a TV remote controller and pointed it at Karel's throne, which rose about an inch as small wheels emerged from the bottom of each leg. Mr Thomas and Mr Occam got up from their own seats. Then, with Mr Thomas leading the way, Mr Occam pushed Karel back through into the room where he had woken up, as if he was some elderly invalid in a wheelchair.

Knowing what he did now, it seemed incredible to Karel that he hadn't realised at once that the alleged hotel room was simply a crude stage set. The walls were plywood panels, in some places not even properly screwed back onto the frame. There was a blank white screen outside the window where there was supposed to be a view of the city. But you see what you expect to see. The sense of smell, it seemed, was less easily fooled. All that had troubled him on waking had been that plasticky, slightly disinfectant smell.

However it wasn't the room that that Messrs Occam and Thomas wanted to show him. Using his remote, Mr Thomas unlocked the bathroom door and they passed through. Of course there was no bathroom. In fact what lay beyond wasn't so much a room at all as a hangar or a factory floor. Its dull metallic walls rose to the height of two ordinary rooms and it was the length and width of a soccer pitch. Down the centre of it was a row of five large ovoid objects lying lengthways, each about three metres long and two metres high. They were complex structures, made predominantly of metal. A thick mass of cables – red, green, black, blue, yellow, multi-coloured – fed into plugs across their surface and trailed back across the floor to a bank of monitors against the wall. There was an ozone smell and a soft electrical humming.

"In case you're wondering, Heinz," said Mr Thomas, "these giant Easter eggs are Field Inducers."

They approached the nearest inducer and Mr Thomas pressed a button on its surface to make a segment of the egg slide upwards to make an opening. Inside, beautifully illuminated by lights both above and within it, was a bath of clear liquid. It smelt of iron, like blood. Karel could feel the warmth of it on his face.

"So you're trying to say you grew me in there?"

"You don't *grow* things in a Field Inducer," said Mr Thomas.

"You *assemble* them. Field induction isn't a biological process. It's a physical one. Think of making a recording of a sound. You don't



try and reproduce the same conditions that led up to the sound being produced in the first place, do you? You by-pass all that. You construct a device that can copy the sound waves themselves."

"But yeah," said Mr Occam. "That's what we fished you out of. When you'd got a face, that is, when you'd got past the stage of just being a big clot of blood. We fished you out, put you on the recovery table and got you going with a jolt of current. Then we gave you a shot to put you to sleep for a bit and took you through to the bed."

Mr Thomas nodded. "So what we're saying, Heinz, is that this is the can you came out of."

Karel couldn't help remembering his dream of drowning and of hands holding him down but he managed a derisive snort. "It's all a film set," he said. "Like the hotel room." This was actually *good*, he tried to tell himself. It was good because it was taking up time. The longer he could keep Mr Thomas and Mr Occam busy with trying to prove he was a copy, the nearer he'd get to his twenty-four hour deadline before having to face the challenge of physical pain.

"Hang on, Heinz, hang on," laughed Mr Thomas, "we haven't finished yet."

Mr Occam pushed him forward to the second Field Inducer. Once again Mr Thomas touched a button. Once again inside a warm metallic smell wafted out, but...

Karel gasped. Suspended in the fluid, neither floating nor sinking, was a flayed human corpse.

"Dear God," he whispered. "What have you done?"

"That thing bothers you does it?" growled Mr Occam. "You should have seen my brother's girlfriend after you lot blew her head off."

The thing suspended in the water was dark red like congealed blood, its face half-formed, an eyeless orifice-less sculpture made of blood. All over its surface were hundreds of fine, branching strands, which at first seemed to be some kind of growth like seaweed, but then turned out not to be solid outgrowths at all but patterns of inward movement, rivulets of matter being drawn from the surrounding fluid and flowing into the solid mass of the body.

"Recognise the face at all?" asked Mr Thomas.

Karel looked at the eyeless mask. Red as it was, eyeless and hairless as it was, covered as it was by the little branching rivulets, the resemblance wasn't immediately obvious, but now that he looked more closely it was unmistakable. This thing was a likeness of himself.

"We always make several copies," said Mr Thomas. "It gives us a margin of error. If we're too rough with the first copy and it goes and dies on us, we can fall back on one of the others. Copies aren't quite as resilient as originals unfortunately. In fact in about ten per cent of cases you can't even get the heart to start and we just have to bin the things." He looked down thoughtfully into the mineral bath. "It's funny. It doesn't matter how many times I've seen this, I still always find myself wondering why they don't drown down there, and why they don't float or sink to the bottom. It's hard to get your head round the fact that it isn't a living entity at all at this stage. *Nothing* is moving in there. The field is a rigid template, the matter flows into it, and once every particle is in place, it is locked there, completely and utterly motionless. It's the

ultimate in suspended animation."

They moved towards the third Inducer.

"This will only have been started a short time ago," said Mr Thomas as the panel slid open.

At first this one seemed empty – there was certainly no solid object in there – but after a moment Karel made out a faint reddish vaguely man-shaped blur. Mr Thomas took an aluminium pole which rested against the Inducer and stirred the liquid until the reddish mist had disappeared. Then he laid down the pole again and they watched as the wispy shape slowly began to reassert itself.

"Suppose what you say is true," said Karel/Heinz. "Suppose that I *am* only a copy of Karel Slade. Why tell me?"

Mr Thomas glanced at Mr Occam. "Well in a certain sense, Heinz, it doesn't make much difference to us whether you believe yourself to be the original or the copy. Either way you have the information we want and we're going to extract it from you by any means possible. And if that involves razors, that's too bad. If it involves putting vinegar on your scalded flesh or pulling off your nails with pliers, that's too bad too. But it does seem *unfair*. So Mr Occam and I, when we talked outside earlier, we agreed that you might like to reflect on your position a bit before we go any further."

"What do you mean, my position?"

"Think about it Heinz. Think it through. If you resist and we have to hurt you, you won't be suffering on your own account but on behalf of Karel Slade. *You've* never been part of the SHG. We know that. In fact we're your alibi. We can vouch for the fact that we fished you out of the soup ourselves, only a few hours ago. So there's no doubt about it, *you've* never ordered anyone's death. *You've* never harmed anyone at all." Mr Thomas took hold of Karel's throne by the arms and turned it to face him. "You're an innocent man, Heinz," he said. "Why should you suffer on behalf of someone else? Why should Mr Slade be protected by the law while we torture you to try and stop *his* wrong-doing."

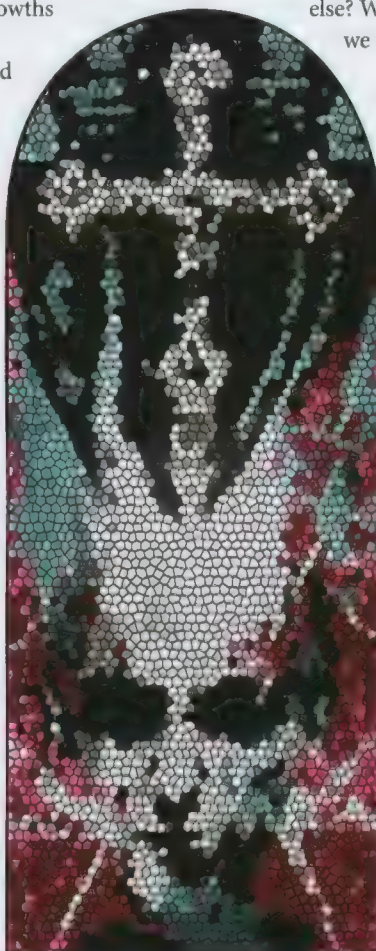
"Even if I am... Even if I'm not..." Karel glanced at the misty red phantom of himself suspended in the mineral bath. Tears came welling up into his eyes. "I mean *whatever* I am," he persisted, fighting them back, "my beliefs are still the same."

"Hey, hang on a minute there, Heinz, are you quite sure about that?" protested Mr Thomas. "No difference? Your beliefs the same? Think about that for a minute. Think, for instance, about what Karel Slade would think of you."

"What do you mean?"

"Wake up Heinz!" said Mr Occam giving the throne a rough shake. "Wakey wakey! You're a *copy*, remember? You're an *abomination against God*. That's what Karel Slade thinks, doesn't he? He thinks that even the lab technicians who *make* things like you deserve to be killed. And as for you, well you're just an object to him, aren't you? You're just trash."

"That's right isn't it Heinz?" asked Mr Thomas. "In Slade's book you're not even a person. You have no soul and no feelings. You have no rights, not even a right to pity. Think about it. That man we watched in the restaurant earlier on, if he knew what was going on here, would be pretty worried. But he wouldn't be worried about *you*. He wouldn't give a damn





about you. Your feelings just wouldn't come into it."

"So if you don't tell us what we need to know," said Mr Occam, "and I have to hurt you, you'll be suffering for another man who cares nothing for you. A man who denies you are even capable of thinking and feeling."

"But he'd be wrong there wouldn't he?" said Mr Thomas. "You *do* think, don't you Heinz? You *do* feel. Mr Occam and I, we know that and, like I said before, we aren't sadists, whatever you might think. We'd really rather not hurt a living thing who's done nothing wrong at all."

Heinz looked from one to the other of his two interrogators.

*Help me God*, he began to pray, but then stopped. How could he pray if he was a copy? What was he to God? God belonged to Karel Slade, laughing and joking in the restaurant with his pretty wife, not to this flimsy shadow, summoned out of nothingness by a machine.

"So what will happen to me? When this is done, I mean."

"Well if you stop to think about it, Heinz, I think you'll realise that we're going to have to terminate you," said Mr Thomas gently. "As you pointed out yourself, you can't legally exist. And copies don't last long anyway. A week or two at most. You'll have to go. But it can be peaceful if you want it to be, quiet and peaceful and soon."

"Yeah," said Mr Occam, "and think on this. If you act stubborn and we end up killing you the nasty way, well then we'll just take that blood-clot guy out of the Inducer there and start hurting *him*. And if he doesn't play ball, well then we'll take out that cloudy guy – he should be good and solid by then – and start on *him*. And if he plays the hero, well then, we'll get a few more copies going that don't even exist yet, and bring *them* alive just so they can suffer like you. But if you talk, well then they're all on easy street. They can all stay in oblivion for good."

Mr Thomas touched a button on the Inducer and the lid slowly closed.

Back in the interrogation room, Heinz told them the codes and the names and the bank details. What were these things to him after all? He was no more responsible for them than a man at an airport was responsible for contraband slipped into his luggage when he was looking the other way.

When Heinz was finally done, Mr Thomas went and fetched three cups of coffee from a machine in some other part of the building that Heinz would never see. He brought the three cups in on a little plastic tray, along with some little packets of biscuits, and used his remote controller to release Heinz's wrists from the shackles so he could hold his. For a short time they all sipped peacefully in companionable, almost dreamy, silence.

But after a few minutes, with the sigh of a man reluctantly picking up a burden, Mr Thomas placed his half-empty cup on the floor, reached into his jacket and took out an automatic pistol with a long white silencer.

Heinz felt no emotion. Less than twenty-four hours ago, after all, he'd been nothing but inanimate matter. He'd been a simple solution of minerals in a bath. Why fear a bullet that would simply return him to his natural state?

"Hey! He needs to know the truth first," Mr Occam said. "He needs to know the truth before he dies. He should know who he is and the price he's paid."

Giving a regretful grimace, Mr Thomas nodded. "Listen Heinz," he said, lowering the gun. "Mr Occam is quite right. I'm afraid there's one more thing we haven't told you. You see, it's true that we did copy Karel Slade. But here's the thing. We lied to you when we

said you were the copy."

"What do you mean?"

"He means," said Mr Occam, "that you really *are* Karel Slade. We knocked you out with chloroform in your hotel room and brought you here."

Heinz remembered the hospital smell and the dream of being held down. "But... That can't be. I mean... what about the restaurant? I mean we saw Karel Slade in the..."

"He was a copy," said Mr Thomas. "Though *he* doesn't know that of course. He believes *he's* the real Karel Slade."

"But..." Heinz – or Karel – struggled to frame a coherent question. "But why swap us round then? Why not just leave me in the hotel?"

"Copies aren't perfect. They always die after a week or two. Sometimes it's a stroke or a heart attack. More often two or three body organs pack up all at once without warning. And copies have a way of just suddenly dying on us if we put too much pressure on them. Doing things this way round avoids that problem. And what's more it gives us a way of eliminating Karel Slade the terrorist without blowing our cover. It'll look as if he died of natural causes."

A small puzzle resolved itself in Karel's mind. "Yes I see. Just like with Leon Schultz."

"Exactly. We copied him too. He told us everything he knew. The rest of you took the copy for the real man and never suspected anything. Your copy will die soon just like his did."

"He might die tonight, of a heart attack, in bed with that lovely wife of yours," said Mr Occam, smiling coldly for the second time since Karel had met him.

"James!" reprimanded Mr Thomas.

Karel looked up. He'd barely been touched by Mr Occam's jibe, but he was surprised to discover that his tormentor had a first name. "What's *your* given name?" he asked Mr Thomas.

"Herbert," said Mr Thomas, a little uncomfortably. He quickly formalised things again by prefacing the name with a title. "Agent Herbert Thomas." He caught Karel's eye and glanced down at the gun to remind Karel of their unfinished business.

Karel nodded. "Give me one minute," he said. "Just one minute."

"Of course," said Mr Thomas. "You need to sort out who you are again. I understand that. Just let me know when you're ready." Transferring the gun to his left hand, he reached down for the remains of his cup of coffee. "Ever had that thing when you wake up in the morning and, just for a moment, you can't think who you are?" he asked Mr Occam. "It's a mystery, this identity thing, isn't it? I never cease to be amazed how quickly we can persuade a man to part with it. It's just..."

Then remembered that these were Karel's final moments on Earth and he broke off, placing a finger on his lips with an apologetic glance at his prisoner.

In the silence Karel bent forward in his execution chair and tried to pray. *Dear God forgive me.*

But there was no sense of a presence listening to him. *Well, of course not*, he thought. He couldn't really expect just to pick up the mantle of being Karel Slade again and expect to resume business as usual. Not after what he'd done.

*Dear God forgive me*, he tried again. *I just didn't know. I didn't know who I was.*

Chris lives in Cambridge with his wife and three children. He has been publishing stories in *Interzone* since 1990, most recently 'Piccadilly Circus' which was reprinted in Gardner Dozois's 2005 *Year's Best* anthology. Chris's acclaimed first novel *The Holy Machine* is available now, and two more novels are in the pipeline. More info at [btinternet.com/~chris.bb](http://btinternet.com/~chris.bb)



## ROBERT DAVIES THE SHIP

The Ship arrived on the first Tuesday of the month. A silver spheroid of exotic metal, it hovered a half mile above the ruffled waters of Boston harbour. It was invisible to radar, and it did not affect radio or television reception (it was claimed by many that cellular reception actually improved, though the sudden spike in breathless calls crashed the system nonetheless). Birds gave the Ship a wide berth.

Given the proximity of MIT and Harvard, the scientists were quick to arrive.

The military was close behind, those not out spreading democracy and cutting brush. It was with remarkable restraint that they took nearly two weeks before firing the first missile.

It did not explode, and the Ship did not react.

The fifty-second one did not explode either, but Raytheon got a new contract and some Senators got to go golfing while their wives shopped.

A structure reminiscent of three oil rigs strung together with enclosed walkways and dotted with helipads and boat moorings sprung up over the course of the next year.

Along the shore, several makeshift tents filled with cults and doom-sayers went up, supplementing the mobile homes and RVs of the Scientologists, the Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and Mormons; all claimed that the Ship at once confirmed their creed and threatened the souls of the unsaved. The new Church of the Ship, like its God Above, said nothing.

Immense banks of high-wattage speakers were constructed beneath the Ship, with nearly the entire library of digitized sound queued up in stacks of hard drives. An accelerated barrage of music and narrative crashed against the indifferent Ship, in the vain hope of finding some sonic key or inciting some response from those inside.

The Ship, perhaps deaf, remained silent.

Grown bored, the scientists returned to the classroom, the priests and imams found new sins to condemn, and the military found new targets for their missiles.

The Ship did nothing.

Of course, the major nations soon found their civilian space programs reinvigorated, and their military space programs sucked at the teat of GDP with vigour and glee. Domes dotted the lunar landscape, and blinking skeletal shipyards orbited the equatorial elevators. In mere decades, seven bulky yet majestic craft plodded toward the edge of the solar system, each inspired by the search for the creators of the Ship.

Each of the seven was destroyed before reaching Uranus. One fell to saboteurs, another to a religious coup among the crew, a third was scuttled by a fist of space junk, and the fourth was blamed on a mathematical error due to an engineer's lifelong distaste for the metric system. As each country watched their national pride founder between planets, trigger fingers grew itchy.

An experimental nine-stage semi-sentient missile atomized the fifth ship.

The sixth ship was ordered to crash into the seventh.

It was the second World Government that finally managed to corral the national interests of its constituents into a rather more coherent space plan. Self-perpetuating wombships were created in the thousands and shot at random to the stars, each pregnant with blueprints, genetics, and poetry.

The Ship hung quiet in the sky.

Humanity had settled into different corners of the galaxy, tweaking and twisting itself until it resembled nothing before seen. She became the solar drifters, dreaming long, intricate philosophies in the wild heat of stars. He became the baryonic gimps huddled in the icy abysses between. She shunted her intelligence into chips and crystals and quantum foam. He became the Quo, who folded galaxies like origami, and then folded themselves.

But they would never go beyond that, would they? They could never truly let go. How many times has it been that an Expansion or a Scattering or a Digital Exodus has come crawling back to Earth? How many times had they quailed at how far from humanity they had gone and turned back and followed the star trail back to the first one, this old, pitiful Sun, and the Ship that hovered above the third planet?

The gaseous Pontiff of the Strentaniam Miasma turned to his Coevals.

++We see here a blatant attempt at deception++

His filaments indicated the Ship that hung in the sky above them.

++Imagine the gall to claim that this small planetoid gave birth to the race of Man++

The Pontiff gestured and mounds of dirt arose around them, exploding into clouds of brown earth.

++Mere dirt! Pah! Certainly, Man came from the Clouds++

The inhabitants of the gas giant Pulversity 6, ensconced in their Perfectglass shells, laughed and burped naughty limericks about dirt and the Ship.

The Ship did not stir.



The quantum pilgrims popped into existence on the hillside beneath the Ship: beneath them a rusty beach of silica and asphalt stretched to the horizon. The ocean that had once covered the lands around had long ago poured into chasms in the crust, to spill and steam out many miles away.

The pilgrims regarded the Ship. Their U-ghz minds collated bits of information: the number of photons reflected by the exotic metal, the motion of air molecules as sour winds caressed the quiet Ship, the composition of the planet beneath them (ancient cities worn away to grit and powder), the ingredients of atmosphere, the perturbations at the quantum level.

In the long five seconds of their pilgrimage, nothing novel was discovered.

The Ship maintained its secrets.

As one, the quantum pilgrims popped out of existence.

The tattered remnants of Man returned to the Earth, hoping to elude the impossible reach of the Adversary. Whether spawned in quantum pools of AI thought or in unknowable broths of exalted genes, the Adversary of Man was implacable. In a century, it had decimated the myriad bastions of all manner of humanity that had flourished across a thousand galaxies.

As they fled, the remnants of Man peppered the cosmos with sentry beacons to monitor the encroachment of the Adversary and its implacable machines of metal and bone.

Gathered in their settlements around the Ship, the sole rallying point on the desiccated world, the remnants of Man settled in and waited.

The Ship waited, too.

The Shaman rode a worn wagon of wood and steel, leading his people through the trees. The Ship hung in the sky before them, tangible proof of the Star Gods' powers. The Chosen had come to the Place of Revelation at last.

That rickety wagon became the cornerstone of the Tower to Heaven that quickly arose. Calloused hands felled great swaths of forest and shattered great mountains of stone with a singular purpose, the industry of thousands united in the building of the Tower.

It rose with a slow, but certain, elegance, until that fated day when it reached the Ship.

The Shaman gathered his people around, men, women, sexless. All wore adoring faces, their eyes glinting with wonder. He spoke to them of the Old Gods, and of the Gods Older Still, and the New Gods that lay quietly in their Ship above them now.

Only the faithful would be welcome.

Only the few would be saved.

The Shaman suffered one broken leg and an even dozen broken ribs as the crowd surged forward, the heated mass making its ungainly way to the Tower. A small gold-skinned hermaphrodite was the first to reach the Tower, and it quickly began its mad scramble up the tall Tower. It was followed by men, women, children and drones, all seeking the blessing of the New Gods.

The Shaman, in agony, had an ideal vantage point from which to watch the Fall of the Tower. The wooden structure didn't merely topple; it imploded in a dusty cloud of stone, wood, flesh and dried mud. It formed an impromptu cairn beneath the silent Ship.

The Shaman laid back and waited as the Little Gods within his blood soothed his pain and mended his bones. As night fell around him, the Shaman stood, whole again, and made his way inland alone, toward the Heart of Merica.

The Last Man stepped from the worldforest into the clearing, the vast silver of the Ship visible through the opening in the hypertrees.

He could not believe his quest was at an end.

From what he could puzzle together from the sung histories, the Ship had stood silent watch over a dying Earth for millennia. Never once did the occupants communicate with Man. Never once did they make their intentions known.

The Last Man would learn why.

He strode toward the Ship. Several of the greatest hypertrees brushed against its silvery hull.

Finding a suitable tree, the Last Man began his ascent. It took him four days, pausing occasionally to sleep among the giant branches and murmur the required words.

His climbing spikes were worn down and his hands bled when he clambered off the tree and onto the smooth hull. He stood gingerly and made his way toward the top of the seamless Ship.

He knocked his hand against the cool metal, saying all the right words. Surely, they would understand.

After waiting for a few moments, he slammed his hands against the exotic metal. The sound was of meat slapping against stone.

The rage of righteousness filled him and he struck the metal yet again. His finger bones shattered, yet he did not relent. His continued assault only served to have slivers of bone pierce the flesh of his knuckles, and soon his hands and forearm were sodden with blood. He slammed again and again until exhaustion overtook him and darkness fell.

He awoke with the light of the morning sun reflecting off the silent metal.

His hands were new.

He slammed them again into a red ruin. And again, he slept.

The Last Man continued this ritual for almost two weeks.

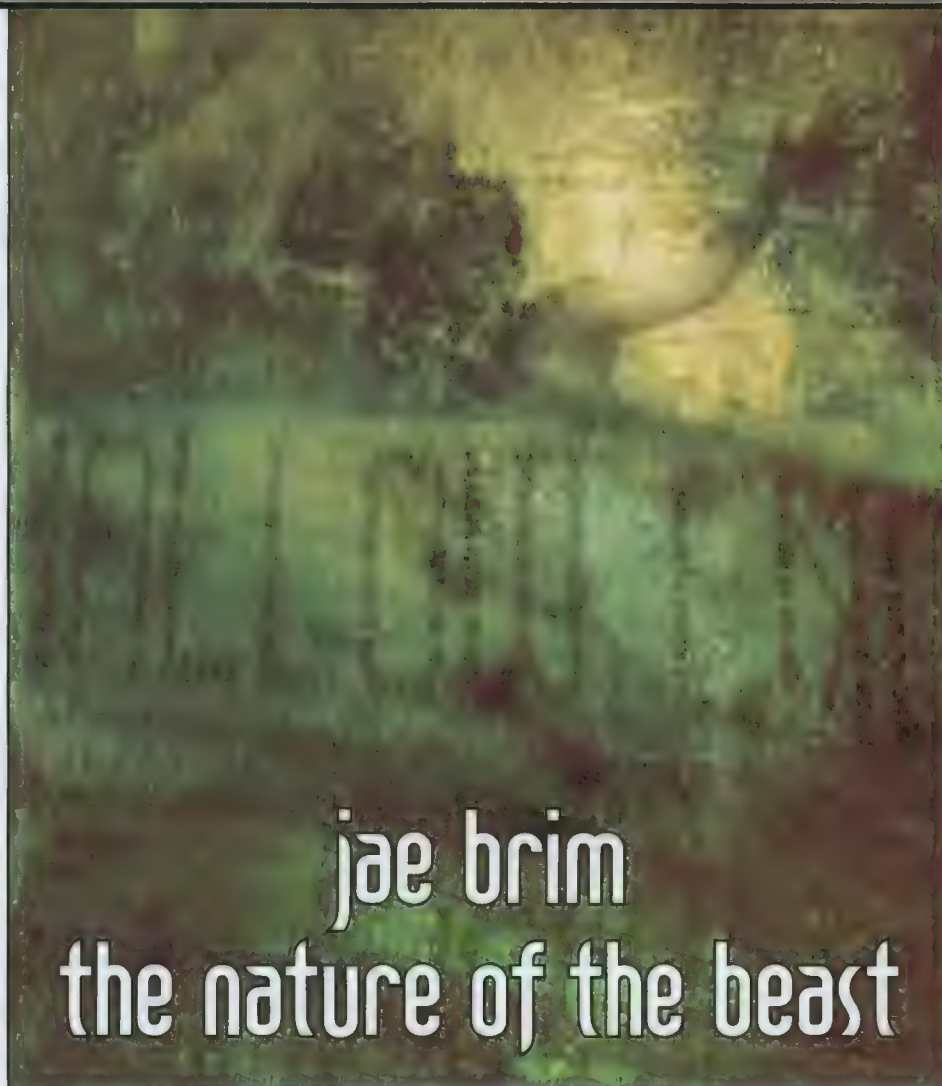
He then felt hungry. It was a feeling he actually had forgotten to recognize. His Little Gods were now angry and demanded sacrifice. He had no elixir. He had no tongues of the wildebeests. He had no water. One by one, the Little Gods stopped their sacred dance. He felt forgotten pain as he fell forward, sliding toward the edge of the Ship, and then over.

The Last Man was dead before he hit the ground.

The Ship rose toward the stars.

Rob Davies lives in Cambridge, MA, with his wife Sara and their two cats, Lilith and Tiamat. His favourite Horseman is Pestilence. Visit him online at [robertedavies.com](http://robertedavies.com)





## jæe brim the nature of the beast

“Clio,” Alexi says. A muse, a goddess, and an old lady name. It is also my name, because if you think about it, Clio is a good nickname for Clone.

I am not thinking about it. I am not listening to him, to Alexi, or looking at him, where he stands at the doorway to my classroom. I already know how much he dreads coming to this side of the house, seeing me, a girl. I am looking out the big windows behind the blackboard, down to the lawn and the cliffs above the Long Island Sound. It’s full of workmen in stained grey uniforms, draining the big swimming pool. The green salt water slowly sinks down the stained sides, waiting to expose the secrets beneath. An old man stands to the side, waiting, watching. He looks up at the windows and I wonder if he knows I’m watching too. He should know it isn’t my fault. It is all genetics, and it started long before me.

Alexi leaves the girl and goes down to the pool. The security consultant, that the company has already found and hired just for this occasion, is already there. His name is Morris and he wears expensive khakis and a jacket too warm for spring. He is old, but not frail, with white hair and a dark tan, as if he spends most of his time in Boca Raton and not here in Greenwich, working. Alexi already knows he was a detective with the Greenwich Police Department, before moving on to security for the very rich. Now he watches the workmen like a cat surveying a bird feeder, missing nothing, waiting to make the right move.

“It was an accident,” Alexi says, knowing his opening gambit must be as good as the evidence the workers will unearth. “Clio knows she’s not allowed in the pool by herself. I should have explained it to Clark more clearly.”

“You must be Alexi,” Morris says. “You don’t look like a woman.”



"Is a mother required to raise a child?" Alexi asks carefully, watching Morris's hands, his shoulders, for the signs that won't show on his face.

"Henry had one," Morris says, betraying nothing except what he wants Alexi to know; that he is familiar with this family, with this situation. Something that Alexi, that the company, already knows. It is why Morris is here.

When Alexi doesn't flinch, Morris shrugs and looks back at the workers and the pumps. "A salt water pool is quite an expense, and this one isn't well maintained. Why didn't you drain it a long time ago?"

"Henry's mother had one," Alexi replies carefully, not looking at the murky green water. "She believed it was good for the skin and the soul. We try to keep everything as it was when Henry was a child, for the development, you understand."

"Ah yes," the detective says. "For Henry the second. It's a pity he died so young. Thirty-eight... I remember when he was a boy."

"Her name is Clio," Alexi says, without emotion, but the detective picks up the careful neutrality of his voice.

"So Henry is a girl this time?" Morris laughs. "His mother would be proud."

In my wing, in my room, I watch old clips of Henry on my tablet. Henry, speaking on asset distribution, addressing his shareholders in the carefully calculated tone that I've learned means he's mad. Henry, at a political rally of some kind, thousands of people chanting his name, while he smiles his publicity smile. Henry, at a charity event, holding the arm of beautiful woman as if she were a snake who might bite him. I should feel lucky, to be Henry's clone. I have an estate and Alexi, who will teach me all the things I need to know in order to become the person I once was. Now I am eleven, and by the time I am twenty-one and inherit my company, I will be the best version of me technology can make.

Henry bought and sold things – money, pieces of insubstantial data, the air over your head, anything somebody wanted – cheated people really and made them feel good about it. That was Henry's way, the thing that had made him great. He could sit down in any situation and act perfectly at home, share things about himself and be unashamed of them, the things that would make other people believe he was like them. He had a talent for these things, for fitting in and making people believe him, even when the deals he made were barely legal. A talent for lying, for using any means necessary to get what he wanted and knowing he wouldn't be caught.

I'm not supposed to know these things, or to see these videos. No one is supposed to have absolute destiny, a certainty of the thing they will become. Except I am as resourceful as my original, and like him, I'm not afraid to use any advantage to my favor. I can figure out the locks on Alexi's office and the passwords that block the 'net. Henry is a matter of public record, as am I, and the passwords that block Henry's private memories are not hard for someone who knows him as well as I. I know what I am supposed to be, and like Henry, I'm not ashamed.

So I learn. I have a private tutor, like Henry did. I do the things Henry did – I ride, I swim, maybe without the same affection. I am made of Henry's genes, but Alexi explained firmly the people who paid for me wanted no chance of nurture dominating nature. I would live Henry's experience, even though I was a girl.

"Why have another clone made anyway?" Morris asks. "Isn't it expensive? All this money invested, and then another

twenty years before you see any benefit."

"Of course," Alexi says, barely smiling, "but Henry Andreson was a man."

"The randomization factor," Morris says and smiles slightly too, as if in a private joke. "Of course. But if you think it's genetics that controls it, then why this elaborate charade, with the pool and the estate and the childhood from another age? Shouldn't nature overcome the environment, no matter what kind of nurturing she receives?"

"This is the company's future we're talking about," Alexi bites off his words. If Morris works for them, it should be obvious. "When she is twenty-one, Clio will inherit a sixty-eight percent share in the ownership."

"I didn't realize it was that much," Morris says smoothly, as if to say of course he knew. He had been a detective, after all.

"Henry was very progressive, and very ambitious. He made special provisions to make sure his company would continue in the direction he wanted for it. The Legacy laws helped with that. And, of course, the company would like him back. Holding steady in market share is not enough, and now more than ever, people need incentive to shift. Even as a figurehead, another Henry will be priceless."

"Everything has a price," Morris says, watching the water level.

"As with any kind of investment, the company expects monetary returns at some point," Alexi says, waving his comment off. "But you understand why the trustees would prefer not to leave anything to chance. It worried some of them, that she was a girl. So they tried again, and got a boy. Unfortunately, we'll have to write it off as a loss."

The gene switch, the one that makes us different, and therefore people, is random. When the government and religion finally caught up with science, the laws declared an exact copy would be illegal. An identical twin was a person, because he or she was the result of God's thought, or a random occurrence, depending on who you believed. They were never of deliberate recreation of the works of God. In order to avoid that, or so it was explained to me, the law stated a random change in the genome had to be made. The computer in the breeding labs selected it, at the moment the new nucleus was injected into the dividing egg.

In Randolph III, my pony, it made him white and it didn't matter that Henry had a black pony. You can't reject a healthy copy. Only the ones with debilitating defects, like nerve disorders or spina bifida or missing limbs, get the third trimester flush. There is nothing wrong, supposedly, with being a girl.

Henry Andresen, my original and therefore my father of sorts, was a man's man. He liked to shoot and smoke cigars and entertained at gentlemen's clubs, the ones you need a hundred thousand dollar membership just to enter. He knew his way around the man's world, through the back alleys of handshakes at bars and on driving ranges, and so I have to work extra hard to become him. Emancipation may be hundreds of years old, but women still fight to play poker behind closed doors.

So Alexi has me dress in boy's clothes, and keep my hair short. I have boy's toys and a boy's saddle and my room is blue, decorated with footballs and flags. It is important for me to understand that world from the inside out. Hugs, kisses, babysitting, that is for girls. If I want to play in a man's world, I have to understand what generations of men learn from birth: that people are hard.



I am already a very good poker player. I can beat Alexi at hold 'em and stud and know the finer bits of high low and draw. I don't show emotion on my face and I hold my cards close to the chest. I drink only soda water, even though it tastes like ash, and as soon as Alexi lets me, I will learn to smoke the cigars Henry had imported from plantations in Hispaniola. It is those trappings, the things that sit around the edges of the game, that mislead people from your real passion. The same as Henry's publicity smile, the one that's all teeth and no eyes. You have to make it look as if your intentions are something other than what they are. You have to cultivate your poker face, the same one I used with Alexi two nights ago, when he changed his routine and came to my wing after dark. When he asked me where I had gone.

He is there, face down in the remaining water, shockingly small against the dirty tile. The workmen bring a ladder and Morris takes it down to the body, walks around it, puts on latex gloves but never touches it. Alexi waits, and waits, until Morris comes back up.

"He definitely drowned," Morris says, stripping off the gloves. "The external signs may be enough to rule it accidental."

"How long before you call the police?" Alex says carefully.

"Not long," Morris says, but his eyes betray his casual tone. He looks up the hill, towards the main house. "I hear Henry collected wine, and whisky. Is that true?"

Alexi takes the cue and turns his back on the shape in the bottom of the pool. "We do have a decent collection of single malts he left behind. Would you care to have a glass, after you clean up?"

A week ago, there was another child in my schoolroom, at my desk, a small child with my light brown hair. His clothes were cut like mine. They could even be the ones I wore a few years before. He looked up as I came in, his face like mine, his hands so small they could barely hold my favorite pen. He was me, except he was a boy and so he was perfect.

"You're in my desk," I said. This room, the tutor, the entire estate is mine, but he didn't move, as if he knew he could replace me. I took the pen from him and he got up, as if he would fight me for it.

"I'm Clark," he said. Of course he is. Like Clio, for clone. "I belong here."

"What's your defect?" I asked. Henry would not have been so direct, unless he didn't have the luxury of time. It's best to surprise the enemy, to find his weakness before he knows how to hide it. "What did they change about you?"

"Like my original," he said, in that serious little boy voice, "my heart stops. Alexi says I must watch what I eat, for salt, and to avoid shock."

"It's a good thing you're brave, like Henry," I said. "A scare in the wrong place could kill you." I made it a joke, as Henry would have, the kind a man makes with the competition before he guts their company. Clark didn't seem to notice. His genes might have been more like Henry's, but I am more like him in the ways that count. I knew exactly what Henry would do.

In the great room of the main house, Alexi selects whisky, pouring it from a decanter into crystal glasses. The ceiling arches above them, creating the illusion of isolation, even though a gallery full of





art and shadows runs all around the second floor of the room. There's a noise from up there, and Alexi sees the girl is there. Even the dark pants and short hair can't disguise what she is anymore.

Alexi pretends he hasn't seen her, takes the glasses and steers Morris over to two heavy leather chairs, carefully positioned so the oriental screens and lush carpet muffle the sound of their voices. Alexi sits down in one and leans in to the table, as if he is bringing Morris into his confidence, but Morris is looking up at the gallery.

"You dress her like a boy?" he says, as he takes his glass.

"Like I said, this is the company's future, many of our futures, we are breeding here. Henry lived in a man's world, and so must she. It's ironic," Alexi says, his voice hushed, "Henry's mother always wanted a girl."

"Renee was something of a brat when she didn't get what she wanted," Morris replies quietly. "Poor Henry. She used to dress him in pink and white and grew his hair long, so she could braid it. It wasn't that unusual, for some children to be different, but it humiliated him, the way she didn't treat him as if he were good enough. We all know how talented he turned out to be."

"You knew the Andresens?" Alexi asks. He already knows the answer. It's why Morris was selected, why the company didn't flinch at his price.

"I knew a lot of people, back then," Morris says, settling back with his whisky, "I only agreed to investigate this case because of the similarities to one I investigated thirty years ago."

"Yes," Alexi said. "I hope you will be as discreet now as you were then. This is a very delicate situation. Clio possesses all of Henry's potential, and could lose it just as easily. We're very lucky Ms Andresen kept him so isolated, so it's easier to recreate what created him. Change the circumstances as we need to, for Clio's sake. But who can tell what makes a boy a man? If the media were to get involved, it could be disastrous. If anyone else, someone who might question a drowning, perhaps, were to become involved..."

"I understand," Morris says. "When it comes to the Andresens, I have always been discreet. There are probably records of how discreet, within the family archives."

"Yes, there are," Alexi says, and picks up the decanter, refills each glass. "That's one of the reasons your presence was requested here today. The company thought you would understand."

Alexi always says no swimming in the pool without him, but Henry always said rules are made to be broken. The end result is all that matters, and Henry had learned a lot, from swimming at night. In the dark, after dinner, I went down, took off my clothes and jumped in. I learned to swim when I was seven, like Henry did, and Clark was only five. He didn't have to follow me into the water. He didn't have to listen, when I tricked him the way Henry would, with threats and insults disguised as praise. It was not my fault he jumped in, trying to be as good as me, when he never could. He was only a boy. He didn't splash long, and you could barely hear it where I was, way back in the deep water, watching the stars.

"Did you know Henry?" Morris asks.

"A little," Alexi says, not giving anything of himself away. "I knew him better after he died."

"It must have been hard for him," Morris says, "with his mother forcing him to be something he wasn't."

"Sometimes these are the things that make us stronger. They are the things, more than our nature, that make us what we are."

"And sometimes our nature is stronger than that which is imposed

upon us. After all, he grew up to be a man."

"Things change," Alexi said. "Henry had a way of turning a situation to his advantage. And there was the Slavic girl his mother adopted. You should remember."

"You may rely upon that," Morris replies. He finished his glass and set it down, the crystal making an unpleasant noise against the lacquered table. "She looked enough like Henry to be his sister, and I think she was the miniature version of the person Renee wanted to be. Unfortunately, she didn't live long. I remember the investigation well. A terrible accident, much like this one. No one could ever understand why that little girl would go near the pool. She didn't know how to swim."

"Yes," Alexi says. "A terrible accident, wasn't it? Henry was quite candid about it in the recordings he left for his Legacy and quite careful about how he protected those recordings. You can only view them from one location."

"You've seen them," Morris says. It is not a question.

"Yes," Alexi says and drinks. "Henry remembers the...accident quite clearly. There are very specific details of it, about how he felt and how he remembers it happening. He calls it one of the most formative incidents of his life. It was after that he stopped wearing the clothes his mother gave him, and cut his hair. I don't think she could stop him."

"It's interesting, how history repeats itself. I wonder what this will mean to Clio?" Morris asks, and answers his own question. "But you don't leave anything to chance."

"No, we don't," Alexi says, and stands. "We have a detailed history of the Andresen family, including, I think, that ledger that holds your name. Would you care to come in the office and have a look?"

"Of course," Morris says. "I'm sure there needs to be some adjustments, for inflation, but I can see to it that this drowning is also ruled an accident."

The detective and Alexi talk for a long time, in voices so soft I can't hear them, even from the point in the gallery where the great room's acoustics make sounds converge. Then they go down the hallway, towards the company offices, and I wait. And wait, not allowing myself to be nervous. Sometimes, Henry would say, patience is all about having nerves of steel. The detective leaves, but Alexi comes up the stairs, towards my wing. He doesn't look surprised to find me in the listening spot, and for once, he looks at me as if I am more than just a girl.

"Clark drowned. It was an accident. This is why I told you never to go in the pool." He touches my hair, softly, and then he is gone, towards his suite of rooms and I wonder if he will sleep better tonight, knowing his plan is working well. I am turning out just as Henry did, regardless of being a girl. His touch lingers on my scalp, warm as a brand and I wonder if he really meant the kindness, or if he is just afraid.

Of course he did. Alexi doesn't imagine I could break the codes and see Henry's secret videos. He will never guess I knew the story about the one moment that made Henry who he was, or that I, like Henry, would do it not because it was expected, but because it had to be done. Competition must be eliminated if you want to succeed.

Alexi will never believe me capable of such thinking, because I am a girl. It will be the same with the men I negotiate with, so secure in the fact that I won't be as good as Henry because I am not a him. I will be him. I will be better than him, because I will understand them and they will not know me, will not see me coming until it is too late. This is how I will succeed, how I will become what Alexi and the rest of the company wants, despite being a girl. Because I am a girl.

The next time Alexi wants me to, I will not let him cut my hair.





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## C R I M E W A V E N I N E



She could have reached for the child Amy, who might even have crawled up with the butterfly book, remembering how Polly had given it to her because children remember these things, and Polly could have kept her safe from the baby jaguars that eat Blue Morpho butterflies. *But listen,* Mo McCallum had stopped reading when Amy went very still, *sometimes if it flutters its blue wings very hard and catches the sunlight just right, it blinds the baby jaguar just long enough to get away!* Amy's tiny finger tapped at the picture of the cat. Amy, said Mo, smoothing a hand over the wild yellow hair, *the baby jaguar is just a baby.* But even Blue Morphos get tired, and who is to say that the sun is just where you need it to be to manage those blinding flashes of blue no matter how hard you flutter in the warmth of the jaguar's breath? *Make no mistake,* she wished she could tell Amy. There in her silent cottage, with the reflected white ripples high on her walls, Polly felt his arm slip around her shoulders, the rough suede palm of the racing glove brushing against her light shirt, and she had no more dazzling blue in her to blind him. *Oh, make no mistake, Amy, even if your mother tells you that the baby jaguar is just a baby. The baby jaguar –* he nearly held her in his arms as she saw the bed pillow move in – *is still a jaguar.*

from *Blue Morpho* by Shelley Costa

## T R A N S G R E S S I O N S



And so **Superman Returns** with a heartlifting message of reassurance that it's OK for a bloke to run out on his responsibilities in a vague and narcissistic quest to find himself, betraying all those who depend on him to their own devices, only to turn up years later and expect his old job back, his loved ones to welcome him home without reproof, and the girl he dumped to come scurrying back despite being left all these years to produce his followup on her own. After such a time, we might perhaps have expected a little more. But if nothing else it's an interestingly new kind of film sequel, familiar enough in the world of comics but untried on screen: one that sets out to spin the earth back to an earlier point in time before everything got messed up. Ever since DC's new owners at Time Warner acquired the *Superman* media rights back off the Salkinds in 1993, they've busily dug deeper holes for any revival of the film franchise by letting the intellectual property promiscuously loose in TVland, where *Lois & Clark* and *Smallville* have been allowed to slacken some of the key bolts on the scaffolding of the mythos. Against this background of licentious reconception, a decade of notoriously capricious development saw many of the biggest names in screenwriting given their shot at the project, with a series of ever more radical "reinventions" hitting their nadir in JJ Abrams' justly-reviled 2002 draft in which Krypton didn't actually get destroyed at all. In the wake of all this, much of the rationale behind the Bryan Singer version has been recuperative: to revert the film franchise in spirit and detail to the state in which it was left midway through the original continuity, using Superman's interplanetary sabbatical as a metaphor for both his own long downtime in development hell and the faith-taxing failure of the Messiah to return in glory and establish His kingdom on earth.

It must be said that a good part of the result is fairly awful. Realising the value of the pricey Brando outtakes has left Jor-El's spirit spouting what sounds for all the world like the kind of improvised drivel from whose usable bits the unwritten end of *Apocalypse Now* had to be cut together: "You will make my strength your own. You will see my life through my eyes, and I will see your life through my own. A son becomes a father and a father becomes a son," and so on and on. Indeed, that last thumping vacuity provides the unhappy seed around which the rest of the plot is crystallised, as Superman's 1981 night of passion with Lois is suspected of venturing into a little spinoff of its own. Several of the nineties versions dabbled with knocking Lois up, but Singer's is the first to make the grand Hollywood



theme of paternity for good or ill the centre of *Superman's* meaning, both as fundamentalist allegory ("In recognition of their capacity for good," drones Jor-El's afterimage, "I have sent them you, my only son") and as hero's journey. Mostly it's just ill. "Crystals," ruminates his Lexship: "They're amazing, aren't they? They inherit the properties of the minerals around them, kind of like a son inheriting the traits of his father." There are things worth waiting for in *Superman Returns*, but also a fair bit that should have stayed unharmed in development hell.

Singer's choice to do a *King Kong*, burning a once-in-a-lifetime budget on an extended love-letter to the classic version, has proved a rather mixed blessing in the execution. Brandon Routh turns out to pass the Clark Kent test rather well, but looks a right strippergram in the tights and forelock, and certainly loses pants-down in the thankless battle against the shadow of Christopher Reeve – whose matching to the part looks more and more like the single supreme and most irreproducible achievement in postwar Hollywood casting. The second half of the film is largely sunk by a Luthorian masterplan so super-silly that only Dr Evil could take it seriously, climaxing in a glutinously slow final act that might as well be staged in Latin and Aramaic. Of course Singer does insanely oversized and overbudgeted supermovies like nobody else has come close, and no one could accuse him of flinching from embracing the challenge of making Superman fly for the Bush-era audience. The sight of a plane hurtling towards you is an inescapably resonant one nowadays in a way that couldn't quite carry the same charge in 1978; and to couple that with the prevention of a Shuttle disaster in the very same set piece gives a fairly powerful statement of how horribly wrong it

all seems to have gone for truth, justice, and the American way in the years that Superman has been away from our world. Now that he's back, perhaps believing a man can fly will cause all our street crime and terrorism to be whisked into space, up, up, and away. I don't know about you, but I certainly feel better already.

► AND THEN ►

Kurt Wimmer's **Ultraviolet** bypasses all such inconveniences by the simple conceit of inventing a supposedly long-running comics character from scratch, with a great credits sequence presenting a gallery of fictional covers and anime posters in the styles of industry masters past and present. Thereafter, unfortunately, it's all a bit of a bungee plunge, as Milla Jovovich's resistance stuntfighter battles to keep a secret virus cure (which turns out to be the kid from *Thank You for Smoking* in a suitcase) from falling into the wrong hands (which turn out to be everyone's). As in 2002's *Equilibrium*, Wimmer uses his creaky dystopian scenario principally as an excuse to stage an interminable succession of cool wire fights in arresting Nuremberg sets, but this time without the compensating presence of Christian Bale on dial-to-11 intensity pretending to take it all seriously. The whole charade of a long-running comics continuity backfires disastrously; in lieu of any discernible character or history, the underdog heroine is plagued with "What am I doing?" moments with which the audience can only sympathise. As a stylist of tosh, Wimmer has undeniable flair; but he needs to find something more to work on than his own sub-*Aeon Flux* Euro-SF material.



A rather less pious deconstruction of the same material is offered by Ivan Reitman's **My Super Ex-Girlfriend**, whose densely economical title pretty much pitches itself – to the extent that patience is strained somewhat by the long act-and-a-half it takes Luke Wilson's man of Kleenex to reach the point in the plot where Uma Thurman's woman of steel gets to boil his goldfish with her heat vision, toss his car into orbit, and pursue similar ribtickling acts of vigilante private justice. As in *Returns*, the driving idea is a revision of the Superman mythos that's come to dominate recent screen versions both made and unmade: that the Clark Kent character is not, as traditionally, an act but in a deep sense the real person, as Superman's burning secret and obsessive self-control inhibit the development of terrestrial social skills in anything but his costumed persona. Reitman's film pushes this a bit further, with Thurman's true personality left neurotic, socially inept, and psychotically possessive of any relationships she's actually able to form.

It all makes for quite uncomfortable viewing, if not entirely in the way the film intends. *Simpsons* writer Don Payne's script has left a fair quota of witty lines on the surface of what is otherwise a rather coarse



and androcentric sex comedy that sees forceful but “needy” (a key word) women as something to be mocked, exploited, and shunned, in contrast to the sweetly undemanding Anna Faris character at the other point of the romantic polygon. Throughout, the hero is drip-fed misogynistic relationship counselling from his loser buddy, whose supposedly comic plot advice is given far more screen time than Thurman's

unexplained decay from superempowered high school queen into the nervy stalker of the title. One of the nicer moments in *Superman Returns* has Lois place her feet practisedly on his in preparation for the traditional romantic sky-clinch – a set piece toothcurlingly parodied here as super-Uma forces our terrified hero to copulate at a thousand feet (“Puts a whole new twist on the mile-high club”). It must have sounded great in the pitch.



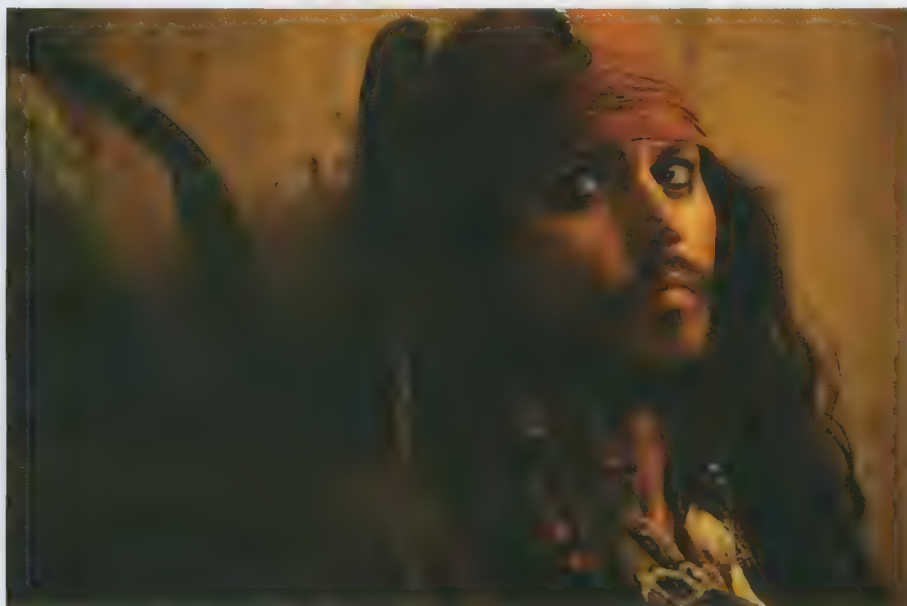


In a softer band of the chromatic spectrum altogether, **Aquamarine** takes a gentle, plotless Alice Hoffman juvenile about a pair of twelve-year-olds finding a mermaid in their pool, and movies it up into a preteen *Splash*-lite homily on the security of adolescent friendship versus the intimidations of adult romance, as a carefully-cast Lohan type and a Gellar type team up to surrogate their own hopeless yearning for the buff local lifeguard on to their new living-doll best friend, a sexually mature ingenue who trusts them like the parents they barely have. Hoffman's adult novels like *Practical Magic* and *The River King* are no strangers to screen adaptation, but this first filming of one of her young-adult novellas has been driven to more extreme measures to squeeze into its gaudier Hollywood wardrobe, with a clumsy new plot stitched together out of entirely ad hoc rules of mermaidology: "We can only have legs when the sun's out, and we have to keep them dry"; "If you help a mermaid, then you get your wish"; "The only way I can get out of my wedding is to prove that love exists," and so forth. On the plus side, the book's elegiac association of the end of summer with puberty and the end of childhood friendships is quite faithfully, if more garishly and sentimentally, reproduced; and it's an interesting surprise, after teasing glimpses of a range of possible ghastly cop-out endings, that in the end none of the principals cashes in her mermaid wish at all. What real twelve-year-old girls will make of it all is harder to gauge; this isn't a market Hollywood understands well, and the pool may be just too small to make much of a splash in.



Similarly risk-taking in its address to a primarily female audience is **The Lake House**, adapted by *Proof* play- and screenwright David Auburn from a buffs-only Korean original, and featuring Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock in a cross-time romance which allows them to communicate across a two-year gap through an enchanted plot mailbox. One has to admire the sheer perversity of trying to deliver a contemporary fantasy date movie in the

all too understandably untried mode of epistolary cinema; and in practice the film swiftly gives up on even attempting to sustain the illusion of epistolarity, with the characters conducting live Q&A conversations in naturalistic faux-realtime ("He wasn't at the funeral. When I asked him why – " "Go on, Alex, what did he say?"). Until the final minutes, it passes pleasantly enough, with Keanu on refreshingly natural form and the twists accumulating attractively enough to encourage willing suspension of all the thumping questions about obvious things the characters never seem to think of doing. But sf dabblers often fail to appreciate the technical demands of time-twist storytelling and the paramount importance of an ending that actually works, something that *The Lake House* inexcusably fails to deliver – leaving a wretched tangle of unresolved paradoxes and incoherences that make a fatal nonsense of the resolution, and yet with only a little more effort could so easily have been tidied away.



Next to *Superman*, the other vast and ungainly extravagance of the summer was **Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest**, a lumbering *Two Towers* of a midquel plotted entirely out of thievable and barterable McGuffins: a treasurechest of ending, unlocked by a key that has to be located and stolen, and pinpointed by a magic compass that always points in the direction of the plot no matter how lost you are, which frankly is most of the time since the exposition tends to be mumbled at speed and the structure dangles tentacles of subplot like the Cthulhuesque phiz of Bill Nighy's squidfeatured makeup. Such sagging, overweight middles are the blight of the new wave of *Superman*-style back-to-back filmmaking; *Dead Man's* first act, in particular, spends forever winding up the keys

on its bits of mechanism, and there's a dreary excess throughout of actor-on-actor debates about motivation. It does come periodically to life in the trademark daft mechanical stunts with large rolling things, though the best devices tend to be the simplest: the elegantly choreographed three-way swordfight and Mexican standoff with cutlasses, and the glimpses of actual thought about the history and politics of piracy, in a quite resonant background plot about the changing world of the privateer in a world where private commercial interests are assuming kinds of power that challenge the scope and nature of government. If in the end it spends enormous sums and time on going absolutely nowhere, that's arguably its job done for this season. Next time, there'll be no such excuses.





Disney's other summer tentpole, Pixar's coolly-received **Cars**, is one of those films whose world is far more interesting conceptually and visually than any story they've managed to find to tell in it. When Kevin Smith was working on *Superman Lives* – the version that eventually collapsed in 1998 with Tim Burton the richer by five million of Warners' money and Nicolas Cage by twenty – one of his bugbears was the stream of instructions from above to incorporate toy designs as part of the already complex merchandising finance, and it's hard not to suspect that *Cars* has been disproportionately fuelled by similar considerations. Everyone plays with toy cars, goes the reasoning, so how can it possibly miss – especially if both the beginning and the end throw in a readymade console scenario for good measure? (As I write, Toys R Us is selling a Lightning McQueen tricycle, which seems slightly to miss the point.)

There's no denying that *Cars*' actual characters and dialogue lack the sparkle audiences have come to expect from Pixar scripts, which has made it all the more perilous to choose to abandon event-driven plotting pretty much entirely for character business and arc, as seems to be the new and dispiriting emergent Hollywood orthodoxy. Yet it's also a film shot through with surprisingly rich and haunting sf resonances. The thrillingly beautiful desert landscapes carry deep if inadvertent associations with post-apocalypse cinema, boosted further by the vision of a self-sufficient machine ecosystem and culture from which humans are obliterated without regret just as if they had never existed. It's perversely apt and effective that the noisy adrenalised set pieces which bookend the film are so outperformed by the rocking-chair-on-porch-paced middle act, with its intense nostalgic appeal to a quieter world of neon and doo-wop in which it's always 1960, when automobiles were our friends and part of the natural order. Whether that world or this is the real one is a question that lingers long after the noise has died down. Perhaps indeed a human is just a car's way of making another car.

No less gorgeous in its ultra-noir way than the sunbaked colours of *Cars* is the Euro-animated oddity **Renaissance**. Seven years in the making, *Renaissance* is an ambitious attempt to devise a native European counterpart to anime, substituting the themes and feel of homegrown French BD for Japanese animation's roots in manga, and taking advantage of the renaissance of rotoscoping in this era of digital motion capture to create a ravishingly beautiful universe of shadows that strikingly recalls David Lloyd's original black-and-white artwork for *V for Vendetta*. It's therefore truly upsetting to see such breathtaking technical accomplishment lavished on a script that wears its plot and dialogue like concrete overshoes, in a dismally conceived sub-*Blade Runner* tale of a future flic caught up in an abduction-conspiracy plot involving a stop-at-nothing cosmetics corporation in pursuit of the secret of youth. (Nobody seems to have considered that it might be marginally more interesting if, just for once, the all-powerful corporate boss turned out *not* to be the evil mastermind behind everything.) It also suffers from an unhappy attempt to internationalise the project with English dialogue and co-production money; an amazing A-list voice cast (including Daniel Craig, Romola Garai, Ian Holm, and Jonathan Pryce) perform so woodenly as to suggest that the dialogue has been post-dubbed Japanese-style on to the completed animation, with the actors having to sync to the animated lips of the original French mocapped actors mouthing dialogue in a tongue not their own. It's a great-looking world, but it's peopled by mannequins.



A more inviting black-and-white dream of Paris unfurls in Luc Besson's celestial whimsy **Angel-A** – another title that only works in French, which is arguably no less true of the concept. A film built over other films in a fairly transparent code of winks and nods, it riffs on the audience's familiarity with *Wings of Desire* and *It's a Wonderful Life* by setting up a supremely hopeless loser saved from the bridge-jump moment by Besson's own vision of angelhood in the form of a six-foot Swedish apparition in picoskirt and gigaheels, and then turning its fantasy odd couple loose in a series of cheerful character routines that gradually pose the question just who is redeeming whom. In recent years Besson has largely withdrawn from directing for a busy second career as a prolific producer and daft-concept screenwriter, and indeed the loan-shark underworld that constitutes the backplot to *Angel-A* has more than a little in common with his second script for Jet Li, the entirely bonkers *Unleashed* which was knocked out in a pause in *Angel-A*'s production and threw its street-gladiator hero into the brutal world of Glasgow piano tuning. If *Angel-A*'s own plot is even more of a wisp, it's still a pleasure to see one of film's great stylists behind his own cameras again and having such fun with his actors; and the film's true star and redemption is the vision of the city itself, shot here in a gorgeous lightly-sepiaed monochrome that invites you to view even the most wearily familiar locations with the same freshness and joy as they come to strike the hero.

Besson also had a story hand in **District 13**, whose slam-dunk of an action pitch is a 2010 Parisian *Escape from New York* with freejumping. Its studiously perfunctory plot teams a ghetto streetfighter and an undercover flic against both the ganglords who rule the walled-off *banlieues* and the system that abandons its ungovernable precincts to gang rule. But the real point of the film is to show off its proud new language of urban action cinema, in which everyone gets around by balletic stunt-leaps between rooftops, descends stairwells by vaulting from banister to banister, and slips into their cars feet-first through the windows. At the back of all the 24-inspired guff about stolen nuclear devices and layers of conspiracy is actually a quite powerful and unsettling vision of governments abandoning the European inner-city to a kind of first-world *Black Hawk Down* – though it goes without saying that all this is just a feather-flimsy pretext for a lot of eyepopping action showcasing innovative and athletic stunts that will surely pass straight into the grammar of wirework cinema. To believe a man can fly is yesterday's magic; right now, the future is leaping between tall buildings at a single bound. **Nick Lowe**



**Counterfeit Worlds: Philip K. Dick on Film**

Brian J. Robb • Titan Books, 320pp, £16.99 pb

In *Counterfeit Worlds*, Brian J. Robb (the current editor of *Dreamwatch* magazine) sets out to give us the 'definitive history' of all of the adaptations of Philip K. Dick's work to both the big and small screen.

He starts with a potted biography. For those who are new to the story of Philip K. Dick, this section is informative and relatively complete. However, for those who have read any of the many biographies of Dick currently doing the rounds, there's little by way of insight or revelation here.

After the bio comes the meat and veg of the book, an in-depth look at the evolution and production of every film based on the work of Dick, from *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* through to the less well known *Impostor* and French oddity *Barjo*, right up to the modern day and Richard Linklater's eagerly-awaited *A Scanner Darkly*. Robb reconstructs the development of each project in exhaustive detail, from the point where the story is optioned until it reaches the big screen.

The tortuous production processes that go on behind the glitter curtains of Hollywood make for fascinating reading. *Blade Runner* had so many script writers working on different permutations of the plot, it is easy to lose count. It is actually phildickian to see the writers themselves becoming lost in multiple versions of the same story, in much the same way as the characters they depict. I'm sure the great man himself would have appreciated the irony.

The directors have just as difficult a task as the writers, battling budget restrictions, meddling producers and egotistical actors. Best of all is when Robb unveils earlier leading men who were pencilled in to play Rick Deckard and Doug Quaid. Not to spoil the surprise, but there are a couple of shockers!

A handful of smaller chapters deal with television adaptations of Dick's work, as well as describing his own attempts to write for the small screen. These felt a little like fillers, and would perhaps only interest hardcore fans who were planning to take *The Life and Works of Philip K. Dick* as a subject on *Mastermind*.

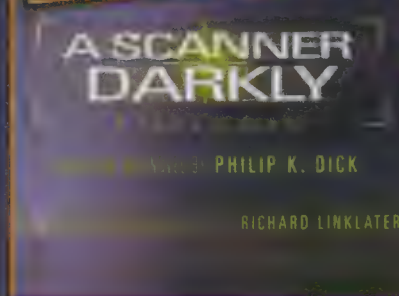
This minor quibble aside, *Counterfeit Worlds: Philip K. Dick on Film* is an absorbing read for anyone who has read the novels/stories and a must for aficionados of the films. Was Deckard really a replicant? What was the real story behind the voiceover on *Blade Runner*? All will be revealed.

Peter Loftus

**THE PHILIP K. DICK FACT FILE**

- ▶ Philip Kindred Dick was born (prematurely) in Chicago on 16th December 1928
- ▶ He preceded his twin sister, Jane Charlotte, but sadly she died six weeks later
- ▶ Dick was haunted by his sister and would use twinning in several of his novels including *Dr Bloodmoney*; *Flow My Tears*, *The Policeman Said*; *A Scanner Darkly*; *Valis* and *The Divine Invasion*
- ▶ This duality is also highly notable in *Total Recall*'s rebel leader, Kuato, a symbiotic mutated twin living in the body of another
- ▶ The first sf magazine Dick read was *Stirring Science Stories* in 1940
- ▶ Dick wrote hundreds of short stories and around forty novels
- ▶ His only other formal job, aside from being a writer, was working in a music store
- ▶ Dick lost his virginity to his first wife, Jeanette Marlin, in the basement of the University Radio store, where he was working
- ▶ Dick went on to be married five times and died aged 53 from heart failure. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* was in production at the time but sadly Dick never saw the finished film

From *Counterfeit Worlds* by Brian J. Robb  
Compiled by Sandy Auden

**Also Received *A Scanner Darkly* by Philip K. Dick (Pantheon Books, 190pp, \$23.95 hb)**

Illustrated version of the novel composed entirely of stills from the Richard Linklater film. The film uses live action photography overlaid with an advanced animation process called interpolated rotoscoping, a technique captured here in a brilliant graphic novel layout with dialogue by the creative team behind *American Splendor*, Harvey Pekar and Laura & Gary Dunim. Set in suburban Orange County, California, in a future where America has lost the war on drugs, Bob Arctor is a dealer of the lethally addictive drug Substance D. When Fred, a reluctant undercover cop, is assigned to tail Arctor, he is launched on a paranoid journey into the absurd, where identities and loyalties are impossible to decode. To bring Arctor down, Fred takes on his identity – and his drug habit. What Fred doesn't realise is that the drug gradually splits the user's brain into two distinct, combative entities, and that he is, in fact, in frantic pursuit of himself. Caustic and eerily accurate in its depiction of junkies, scam artists and the walking brain-dead, *A Scanner Darkly* is an industrial-grade cautionary tale that is as unnerving as it is enthralling.



### Starwater Strains

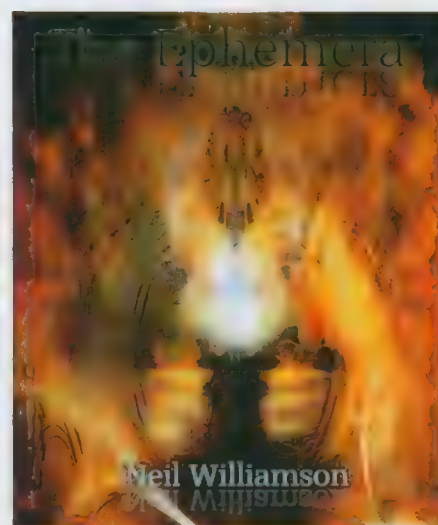
Gene Wolfe • Orb Books, 352pp, \$15.95 pb

A naive woodsman comes to the city to take part in what he believes is a reality-television gameshow, and discovers it's not as clear-cut as he thought. A rescue-centre dog has a curious ability to warp through normal space. A circus strongman is searching for his manager, who has disappeared while in search of a possibly-mythical moon that the FBI are interested in. A man meets an old genetically-engineered dinosaur, and both cast their minds back to the freedom of their youth. A keen huntsman shoots what he thinks is a bear, but which turns out to be something far more terrifying. A high-school nobody starts having strange dreams, and the lines of reality begin to blur.

*Starwater Strains* is subtitled 'New Science Fiction Stories', but readers in search of sweeping space opera or detailed scientific extrapolation will find themselves out of luck.

They might well find much to enjoy in Wolfe's short fiction despite themselves, however, thanks to the wide range of ideas deployed. From playful sketches like 'Calamity Warps', to sf thrillers like 'Try and Kill It', by way of Jungian horror-fantasy yarns such as 'Castaway' and a gamut of others that defy easy categorisation, this collection has only one unifying theme.

That theme is Wolfe's mastery of voice, his skill at picking the right narrator for each tale and becoming them, utterly. Add to this a whimsical ability to give the deadly serious a subtle edge of humour, and to treat almost throw-away themes as if they were high-concept, and the result is a set of fiction that showcases a writer at the top of his game, able to turn his hand to any facet of the craft and perform flawlessly. A reader might not find every story to their taste, or even be able to label them all as sf, but they would be hard pressed to dismiss them as poorly written. If it is possible to set benchmarks for diversity in short story writing, this collection has surely done so. **Paul Raven**



writer. But there's a disconcerting poetic intensity to every one of these stories, from the opener, 'Shine, Alone After the Setting of the Sun', in which an artist communicates with her lover through shards of shattered household objects, to the closing tale, 'The Codsmen and his Willing Shag', in which a young musician undergoes a strange initiation into the dreamtime of his native Yorkshire coast. The transformational power of art and artefact is a key theme for Williamson. 'Softly Under Glass' is a terrifying exploration of the moral responsibilities of the artist and the link between artifice and emotional resonance. And it's a nightmarish feat of imagination that has a genuine power to disturb.

'Sins of the Father', a dark fantasy co-written with Mark Roberts, has a cinematic quality common to many of Williamson's tales. Initially the narrative is reminiscent of John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest*, but it lurches into stranger and much more terrifying territory. 'The Euonymist' is a fiendishly clever tale of cultural imperialism on the grandest possible scale. It typifies Williamson's dexterity in blending genres – sf meets social realism, and the bizarre crashes head-on into the mundane. The Scottish location is deftly realised; the portrayal of a young overachiever returning to the bosom of his family is totally convincing; and collision of the rich lexicon of the Scots tongue with intergalactic politics is life affirming and dryly witty. For me, the standout story is 'Amber Rain'. Williamson meanders down a well-trodden sf path of alien encounter, but creates a highly original tale of loss, erasure and ambiguous experience. A melancholic masterpiece.

Williamson is a master navigator of the dark waters of human experience and emotion. And yet, there's something enormously redemptive about these artful, elegant and disturbing stories. Few writers capture the complexities of beauty, cruelty and grief with such virtuosity. **Andy Hedgecock**



### The Ephemera

Neil Williamson • Elastic Press, 220pp, £5.99 pb

If the short story has come to resemble Father Christmas in G.K. Chesterton's *Shop of Ghosts* – rumoured to be in its death throes for as long as anyone cares to remember, but still here, and still vital – then its survival is due in no small part to the efforts of editors such as Andrew Hook of Elastic Press. In recent years, the Norwich-based publisher has given us three of the finest story collections to come out of the

UK: Andrew Humphrey's magnificent *Open the Box*; *The Alsio Project*, a quirky multi-author anthology; and now Neil Williamson's *The Ephemera*, an inventive, versatile and luminous debut. A cabinet of curiosities crammed with well-crafted, richly textured and utterly absorbing stories, Williamson's territories are the liminal experience and the murky corners of the psyche. He is a virtuoso of the fleeting glimpse, a laureate of loss.

Williamson's prose engages to the point of seduction. It possesses the clarity, accessibility and eye for detail you might expect from someone who earns his crust as a technical



**Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment****James Patterson • Headline, 468pp, £5.99 pb**

It seems that even the world's number one thriller writer James Patterson can't entirely escape the shadow of Harry Potter when he turns his hand to writing for young adults. For the first novel in his *Maximum Ride* series, *The Angel Experiment*, has been gifted a cover blurb worthy of the crassest Hollywood bandwagon: "These children don't need broomsticks to fly."

It's true enough, though; the most notable thing about the six children that form the core of this new series is that they have wings and can fly. This is thanks to the bird DNA that's been grafted onto their own (for reasons unknown, at least by the main characters) by the scientists working in a top secret establishment which the 'flock' refer to as The School. Inspired by supporting characters in Patterson's adult thrillers *When The Wind Blows* and *The Lake House*, this new series puts the titular Maximum Ride at the centre of the action – along with fourteen-year-old, scrawny loner Fang, twelve-year-old girl Nudge, ten-year-old (and blind) Iggy, nine-year-old Gasman (so called thanks to his eruptive digestive system) and six-year-old Angel.

*The Angel Experiment* begins almost two years after the Flock's saviour – the scientist Jeb Batchelder, who smuggled them out from The School – has disappeared from their remote home, leaving Max to take charge. Their relatively idyllic existence is brought to a rude end, however, when Angel is kidnapped by the Erasers – these are "part human, part wolf, all predator" hybrids that essentially do the scientists' dirty work when it comes to cleaning up their failed experiments. Guessing that the Erasers will have taken Angel back to The School, Max, Fang and Nudge go to rescue her, leaving Iggy and the notorious digestive system of the Gasman behind. Annoyed by this, the two prepare to defend their home should the need arises, which indeed it soon does – leaving all of the Flock homeless and on the run – or, rather, on the fly.

Technically, it takes Patterson more than ten chapters to set up this scenario, but that is far from him being slow; his technique of using two or four page chapters, developed in many of his previous thrillers, is used again here. If nothing else, this is bound to please some younger readers, who will doubtless feel genuinely proud of reaching the end of a pair of novels with around 140 chapters each. However, the technique also undeniably contributes to both novels' most obvious characteristic: they're page turners. Essentially, from almost the word go, the action never lets

**Maximum Ride: School's Out Forever****James Patterson • Headline, 404pp, £12.99 hb**

up, unfolding at a breakneck pace that leaves them and the reader with little time to think ahead. Even the relatively few quite moments – such as when Max is recovering from having been shot in the shoulder – are done and dusted within a couple of chapters, essentially no more than a dozen pages. And almost from the opening of *School's Out Forever*, the ante is increased – for instance, with a new generation of Erasers who can fly!

The writing, too, is brisk and to the point; no laboured metaphors or excessive characterisation here. People and actions are defined distinctly and without fuss. "The first whitecoat rubbed his hands together with glee," for example, tells you all you need to know about the villainy of the hybrid-creating scientist looking forward to cutting up Angel's brain. Indeed, that's about all you learn about him at all.

Within the terms of the narrative, of course, this makes perfect sense – although there are hints that the whole story is being told in flashback, as warning to the reader – the main narrative point of view in both books is essentially that of a fourteen-year-old girl who received only a minimum of education. Worryingly, this same narrative tone continues on from Max's first-person narrative into the descriptions of events happening to the other members of the Flock when Max isn't around – which switch without apology or explanation into the third person. Indeed, there are even occasions when a chapter suddenly latches onto the bad guys: this is a blatant example of a writer dropping in some dramatic information (in this case, the surprise return of a villain thought to be dead) which is there to whet the reader's appetite for an inevitable rematch, rather than to progress the narrative. In that sense at least, it's easy to see the scaffolding used to construct these stories.

And the construction blueprint certainly covers all the bases. It's no coincidence that the Flock are effectively orphans looking to track down their own personal histories – their goal after the successful rescue of Angel from The School. It's no surprise that the books touch on some fairly archetypal fears of adolescence – the dangers of the adult world, the discovery of new adult abilities, and a desire to feel important. That these books are professionally written is undeniable; it's just a shame that they seem to lack that special touch willing to let their young readers pause and reflect for a time before the next big fight between flying child and Eraser.

And I don't think it's a secret (that good kids these days aren't reading a whole lot, and I think we do a disservice to books and reading when we just throw up our hands about the situation. We readers all know that when we have the right book in our hands, there isn't a movie, game console, online community, or sitcom in the world that would tear us away, right? I wanted to get a real, honest-to-gosh page-turner out there so some young people could get a taste of what a good book can do to you.

**Why did you decide to use the two and three page chapters throughout?**

I was writing a novel and I had it all sketched out – chapter-by-chapter – with just the crucial action and character details set down. I sat down to go back over it and flesh it out. But when I started reading it over, I said to myself, this doesn't need any more flesh. I like this. And I made up my mind then and there to try to keep to the essentials of the story and skip the stuff that people tend to skim themselves when they read.

**Do you think it also has particular value for drawing in younger readers?**

In as much as young readers have a lot more entertainment choices available to them than we did a generation back, so I tend to think the more they can do to keep the attention of young readers, the better.

**As a successful writer of both adult and children's fiction, do you approach the work differently in any respect?**

I don't approach children's fiction differently at all from a story-telling or writing perspective. The only thing different is that I've put on my 'parent goggles'. I have an eight-year-old, you know, so I'm getting pretty comfortable wearing them. And that just entails keeping out some of the adult situations that you wouldn't want your kid to read about.

**Do you feel that being a parent has given you a better idea of what children want to read?**

I guess I am reading a lot more children's fiction, but I think the fundamentals are the same. Publishers may package the books differently, but kids and grownups look for many of the same things in books. Paramount among what they seem to crave – in my experience – are story, story, and story.

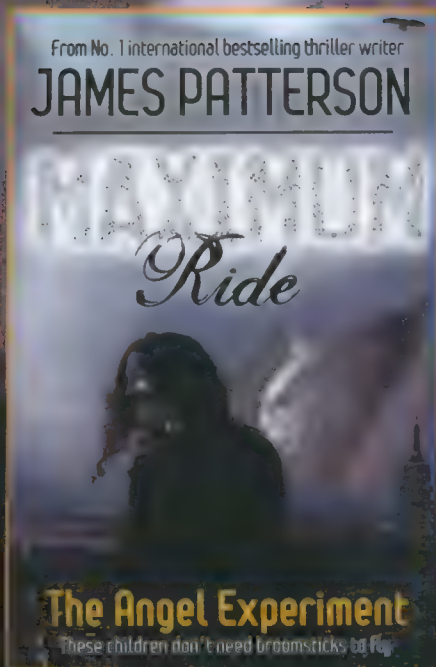
**When you started working on *Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment*, had you already decided it was the first of a series?**





Her name:

Mary Rosenblum • Tor, 320pp, \$24.95 hb



Well, maybe by the second sentence anyhow. It was too much fun writing the thing to confine to a one-off.

**Maximum Ride is currently in Hollywood development – do you keep a close eye on the film adaptations of your work?**

Actually, it's looking like Hollywood is more and more interested in having me involved in the film adaptations of my stories. And, as long as it doesn't get in the way of my writing, I'm happy to help.

**You're incredibly well known for your work advocating literacy in the UK. As both a parent and a writer, how important is this to you?**

Oh, about as important as anything other than the well-being of my immediate family. I'm planning to leave at least half my estate to reading, education, and book-related causes. If there's one thing I firmly believe, it's that we



human beings need to read more if we're ever going to hope to make this a better world.

**One of the premises of the books Patterson wrote is that, in the future, children will be able to communicate with animals. Is it to encourage people to start reading to children?**

It's for absolutely anybody, of any age, race, or creed who is out there doing a good job of spreading the joy and excitement of books. I have always believed the best long-term way to get people to do anything in life is to show them that it's fun to do. It only takes one decent book to turn a person into a lifelong reader but, if they are never introduced to one, they'll never get the habit.

**How long do you think Max and her 'family' will continue?**

What kind of suspense would I be creating if I flat-out answered that question?

In the early 1990s, Mary Rosenblum established herself as one of the exciting new young American writers then emerging in science fiction. She wrote a number of highly regarded short stories, and a couple of slightly less well received novels, then disappeared from the genre for a while to write a series of mysteries under the name Mary Freeman. Now, after a decade in which she has made hardly any impact on the field, she re-emerges with this new novel.

At first this hardly looks like the vehicle to catapult her back to the levels of regard she once enjoyed. It starts out as a very routine hard-sf thriller. Ahni Huang, daughter of one of the all-powerful families that now rules Earth, travels to the platform New York Up to find the killer of her brother. Assassins are waiting for her, but she is a high-level empath and has a number of augmentations that allow her to stay just one step ahead of the bad guys, and after a number of hair's-breadth escapes she works out that her brother isn't really dead but is really the villain plotting something much nastier.

Meanwhile, Ahni's escapades on NYUp bring her into contact with the enigmatic Dane Nilson who appears to be in charge of the zero-gravity garden at the hub of the platform, but is really one of the leaders of the independence movement.

So far, so predictable. Ever since the days of Heinlein at least, every time we encounter a space station or near-Earth colony it has to be plotting independence from the big old imperialist in the sky. And the innocent with amazing abilities dodging death while uncovering a terrible secret is hardly the most original plot device. Rosenblum then adds in, with an insouciance that will throw any geneticist into a tizzy, a bunch of strange beings who turn out to be humans who have adapted to life in zero gee within the space of no more than two generations.

Fortunately, she then proves rather more adept at transforming this unpromising beginning into a complex plot of political double-dealing, blackmail, dyed-in-the-wool villainy and straightforward heroism. The result is a novel that gets richer the more it goes on. Hardly the most earth-shattering of returns, but a competent and in the end satisfying novel that should cement her reputation as an author to watch. **Paul Kincaid**

**« In the early 1990s, Mary Rosenblum established herself as one of the exciting new young American writers then emerging in science fiction »**

**PAUL F. COCKBURN**



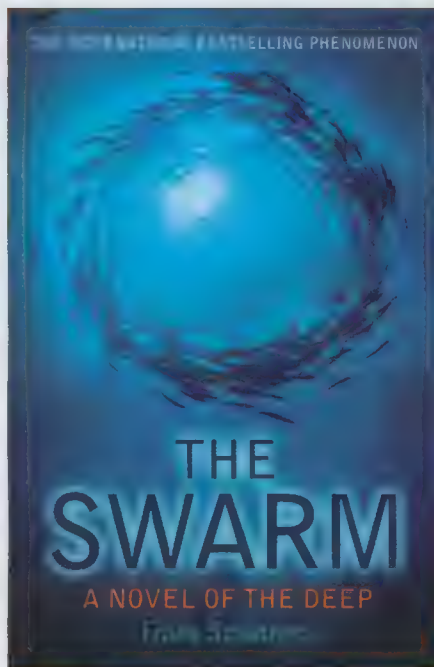
### The Swarm

Frank Schätzing • Hodder, 881pp, £12.99 pb

*The Swarm* is translated from the German *Der Schwarm* (2004). Luckily it doesn't read like a translation. It flows easily, with short, idiomatic sentences and plenty of dialogue. There is incident piled upon vivid incident, a gallery of characters making their entrances and exits, and a wide variety of well-realised settings (mainly in Europe and Canada).

Ancestors such as *The Terror*, *The Kraken Wakes*, and *Jaws* come to mind, as well as those marine nasties emerging from Revelation. And things do start to rise up. As *The Swarm* gets up to speed, it becomes clear that a series of isolated and apparently odd occurrences at sea are connected. For the sea and all that therein is, is turning against us.

A few accidental key-strokes on a laptop creates the Yrr – the rather van Vogtian name that is adopted as the term used to refer to the phenomenon (creatures or aliens or terrorists or whatever) that must be behind the growing worldwide menace. Ecocatastrophe looms. Before long, humanity's very hold on what it has regarded as its own planet seems under threat. An alien invasion is under way – even if the aliens have lived here in the deep seas for aeons. The Americans take charge, led by military and intelligence people (and a President) so stereotypical as to strain credibility – but only sometimes. The survivors from the sane and cosmopolitan cast of characters previously encountered are a welcome contrast.



*The Swarm* is all tremendous and violent fun, and also apparently scientifically accurate. And throughout most of its great length it keeps up a headlong pace. But that's still not quite enough to save what is effectively only a monster disaster book about all sorts of monsters and disasters. *The Swarm* doesn't quite provide the challenge that it might've done to our view of ourselves, and our place and future on the only planet that we have. The message we are left with is: what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. Watch the seas! Watch the seas! **John Howard**

### End of the World Blues

Jon Courtenay Grimwood • Gollancz, 366pp, £12.99 hb

Inscrutability is a virtue of the best science fiction, but only when it is accompanied by revelation. Jon Courtenay Grimwood provides plenty of both in *End of the World Blues*, a strange combination of mystery thriller and far-flung surreal science fiction. It's a mistake, though, to attempt to identify this novel by genre, or even content. Grimwood's prose is dense and his vision is intense. He manages to be both dislocating and involving at the same time, enveloping the reader in characters and places both familiar and foreign on a variety of levels. Grimwood's real accomplishment is to engineer a literary thriller wherein the devices used by mystery writers are deployed to a science-fictional effect, in spite of the actual science fiction content. By the time the strangeness starts to wear off, readers will be so involved in the novel it's almost impossible to put down, or even to escape.

Grimwood plunges the reader into high strangeness early and often. Kit Nouveau is a British ex-pat running an Irish Pub in Tokyo. Married to an eccentric artist, he's also having an affair with a gangster's wife. This proves to be an ill-thought decision, and his friendship with a street urchin doesn't make things easier. Calling herself Lady Neku, the urchin proves to be a refugee from a very weird and distant future, where she's made some regrettable decisions. In fact, everyone in the novel makes the kind of bad choices we've all



Insiders have grudgingly come to accept that science fiction is defined by what they point at when they say they are talking about science fiction. When outsiders are talking about science fiction, however, they are generally pointing at space opera. This has resulted in a tendency by the insiders to slap space opera around a bit – for its own good, of course.

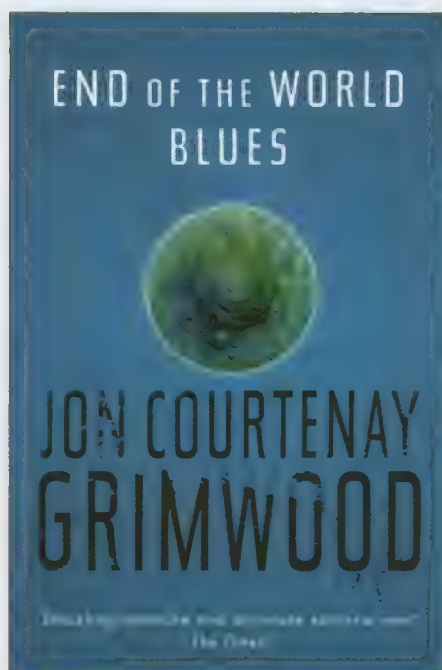
The last couple of decades have seen a revival in the form, both in popularity and in credibility, but there is still an ambivalent attitude about the whole thing which is amply demonstrated in David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer's title to their foreword: 'How Shit Became Shinola: Definition and Redefinition of Space Opera'. And, indeed, the introduction is an exploration of the term, not the form. For an exploration of the form there are thirty-two stories.

The stories are grouped into sections but it becomes apparent that the stories are often not from the dates that they are listed under. The editors have generally chosen to group the authors by their most influential work in space opera. In a field that lends itself towards

novels and series, this will naturally lead to anachronistic choices. Peter F. Hamilton's 'Escape Route' (1987) and R. Garcia y Robertson's cod-cyberpunk 'Ring Rats' (2002) are both in the section titled 'IV: Volunteers: Revisionaries (early 1990s)'. In fact, out of seven stories in that section, only Allen Steele's superb homage, 'The Death of Captain Future' (1995), comes close to fitting the date. Some current authors might be surprised to find that their most important work in the field is many years in the past, but an anthology of this size and scope has to have some order in its contents otherwise it risks drowning the reader. Going after a core series or body of work has also resulted in some forced choices. Iain M. Bank's fine but atypical 'A Gift From The Culture', for example, has had to be included almost by default.

The first story is Edmond Hamilton's 'The Star Stealers', a vigorous piece from 1929 that still stands up despite some dated astronomical facts. In fact, with its Federation Star Fleet setting out on a rescue mission to a rogue planet, including mishaps that see





made at one time or another. In *End of the World Blues*, the complications unfold around the globe and across the centuries.

*End of the World Blues* is both a twist-filled, current-day mystery and a thought-provoking vision of the future. Grimwood's inscrutability gives way to the revelation that there is but a single way to experience this novel; read it, beginning to end. There are no short cuts, only one word to follow another, one world to follow another, until there are no more words or worlds but that of this immersive, inventive novel. **Rick Kleffel**

the hero and his crew being flung around the bridge of his starship, it comes across as remarkably familiar. At times Hartwell and Cramer seem to regard the lively arts' space opera as essentially parasitical to the written word but they make little allowance for the role of television and film in creating an audience for it. Next up is 'The Prince Of Space'. It hasn't aged well. Jack Williamson is one of the minor miracles of science fiction but three-quarters of a century ago he was writing to eat. Regardless of quality, the early sections are covered in greater depth in other anthologies.

The historical stuff continues to be laid out for us until we hit Samuel Delany's 'Empire Star', his stunning Möbius strip of an epic that's so self-aware it's almost conscious. Thereafter we are into the meat of the collection: the renaissance works. Frequently, however, the stories are sabotaged by the introductions. The sentence 'British space opera has not been notably feminist' is mischievously dropped in without an explanation before Catherine Aaro's reverse-gender Gothic romance,

### The Embers of Heaven

Alma Alexander • HarperCollins, 341pp, £6.99 pb

Alma Alexander's *The Embers of Heaven* is a distinctly different sequel to her novel *The Secrets of Jin-Shei*. Both are historical fantasy novels set in an alternate China (here called Syan), but four hundred years have passed between the first novel and the second, and society has changed drastically in the meantime. The theme of this book is the conflict between old and new, as its characters grapple with the question of how a society can best transform itself.

The story is shown through the viewpoints of two characters: Amais, a girl of half-Imperial Syan ancestry who arrives in Syan as an outsider; and masculine Iloh, a Syan peasant who spearheads a revolution. Amais yearns for an idealised past in which Syan was a woman's country, bound by ties of spiritual female friendship, while Iloh is driven by the need to destroy old hierarchies and make all men and women equal. As noted in the author's own afterward, Iloh is based closely on a historical character, that

of Chairman Mao. Alexander unflinchingly shows all of his achievements and tragic mistakes in equal measure.

The beginning of the novel is a sheer pleasure to read, as Alexander tells Amais's childhood story. The pains of her divided heritage and her plight as an immigrant are beautifully shown, and Amais is a deeply sympathetic character. Iloh's story, on the other hand, feels less immediate and engaging, and the sections from his perspective, especially the political debates that are essential to the story, feel slightly artificial and unconvincing. His character takes on a richness and sense of depth, when viewed from Amais's outside perspective, which are lacking in the scenes told from his own point of view. As the story moves on, the book takes on the tone – and, occasionally, the weightiness – of a political parable. Some of the most inherently exciting moments of the novel are told in summary, which serves to further distance the emotional effect. Still, this is a fiercely intelligent historical novel, unafraid to tackle challenging moral issues. Alexander treats her characters and their politics with equal complexity and compassion. **Stephanie Burgis**

**«The beginning of the novel is a sheer pleasure to read, as Alexander tells Amais's childhood story. The pains of her divided heritage and her plight as an immigrant are beautifully shown, and Amais is a deeply sympathetic character. Iloh's story, on the other hand, feels less immediate and engaging, and the sections from his perspective, especially the political debates that are essential to the story, feel slightly artificial and unconvincing»**

'Aurora In Four Voices'. Is it because the British don't have strong female characters such as Tabitha Jute from Colin Greenland's 'The Well Wishers', or is it through a lack of female writers such as Justina Robson (sadly not included)? It certainly isn't from a failure to tackle egalitarian societies. The editors allow Gregory Benford to have a go at the funding of space opera in his introduction. Who will pony up for these giant machines? Stepping over the issue of whether a profession that relies on copyright and contract law should be attacking state help, the obvious answer would be the same groups who fund the current space programmes (and Columbus and most of the rest of the previous waves of expansion, while we're at it). We'll leave out the whole mundane argument for the time being. Unfortunately all of this has the effect of reducing Benford's 'A Worm in the Well' to a game of Monopoly. Calling him one of the prime exponents of modernisms will also give a shock to anyone expecting something of the quality of Virginia Wolfe. Now, if they'd only waited until they'd got to

Ursula Le Guin's 'The Shobies' Story' before trying those arguments...

There is a real surprise in here. 'The Survivor' is a short novel by Donald Kingsbury that's set in Larry Niven's Man-Kzin Wars sharecrop. Space opera lends itself to shared worlds and it is brave and fitting that an example should be included. Anyone who has suffered through countless media tie-ins should read this. It's told mostly from the viewpoint of one of the vicious Kzin and is as bleak as it is compulsive. Flashes of brightness appear from Niven's world, but they only serve to sharpen the shadows.

The final section brings us up to the Singularity with fine stories by Alastair Reynolds and Charles Stross amongst others; Reynold's being one of several that'll already be familiar to long-term *Interzone* readers.

This is a big, heavy, shopping catalogue of a book. It's bound to annoy everyone at times, but operas and renaissances do seem to go well together. **Jim Steel**

Tor, 941pp, \$34.95 hb



**The Last Days**

Scott Westerfeld • Razorbill, 289pp, \$16.99 (Cn\$22.50) pb

**The Stolen Child**

Keith Donohue • Doubleday, 319pp, \$23.95 (Cn\$33.95) hb

First a very short comment on the suicide flight of retail publishers. The two books on review were published in the USA and are distributed in Canada. Over the past year or so, the American dollar has weakened severely world-wide, and the Canadian dollar is now worth at least 90 cents American, which means that – as any publisher would know who knew that Canadians are *far* more aware of fluctuations in exchange rates than their

neighbours in the burning exemptionist south – no Canadian book buyer will pay for either *The Last Days* or *The Stolen Child* without feeling actively cheated. But that Canadian book buyer is largely hypothetical: my guess is that the sale of American books in Canada in 2006 at a 30/35% premium is minuscule. Which is tough on Scott Westerfeld and Keith Donohue. But hey, books published by most retail publishers today are dinosaur fart.

Perhaps to make it seem subliminally more like a bootleg, and therefore cheap at whatever price they can screw out of Canucks, the publishers of Scott Westerfeld's **The Last Days** – which is a sequel to his superb *Peeps* (2005) – have slid it into public view (hey, dude, wanna “book”?) sans ISBN. This supremo cool did not obtain with *Peeps*, which comes to us, fully accredited, over the top of the counter; but maybe the editors at Razorbill thought *The Last Days* needed the help. It does. It is something of a sadsack of a sequel. We should glance at what it follows.

*Peeps*, which is designed with dry-ice efficiency for a Young Adult market, is set in contemporary New York, and Westerfeld (who lives there part time) grippingly engages with his venue, which is the most storyable cigar-shaped island burning at both ends the world has ever seen. Writers who have undertaken to capture New York run the widest possible gamut – from Henry James to Jerome Charyn, from Edith Wharton to Mark Helprin, from Michael Chabon hop-skip to Jonathan Lethem and back, from Hart Crane to John Crowley, from Jerry Siegel to Alan Moore, the list goes on – and Westerfeld's tale sits with polished modesty at the heart of the enterprise: his Manhattan is mimetic on top and urban fantasy below. As with almost any urban fantasy set in this venue – even one like *Peeps*, with its sf rationale – the Manhattan it uncovers is in a sense a single Edifice, like a banyan which grows both up and down: up into the skyscrapers and apartments and aeries of the lords of the city: down past the root canals of the Subway into the stygian Underneath, where the Theatre of things is reversed, and monsters swell upwards stinking from the magma of the world through genital cracks. (One embarrassing omission from my own entry on NEW YORK in *The Encyclopedia of*

*Fantasy* [1997] was Grand Central Station: the largest Portal the world has ever seen into the densest urban space ever: and a literal banyan, because all the buildings north of it for blocks, including the Waldorf-Astoria, are in reality one commensal Edifice built on air rights over tracks, all sharing the same seared intricate skin above, and Jack Finney below.)

Into this venue Westerfeld plunks a warhorse and makes it canter: the young narrator of the tale has (most unusually) survived an infection transmitted by a one-night stand (as in lots of Young Adult novels nowadays, sex can be referred to but not really described: generating a typical Christian Denial Disjunct between visceral horror, which can be described in the most gruesome detail, and the interactions of humans in the flesh, which are shrouded in cant: but Westerfeld does what he can to indicate that sexual intercourse took place without actually saying so). The parasite he has proven commensal with is a form of vampirism which (very briefly) periodically manifests itself when particular threats to the human species manifest themselves, in the shape of giant worms, from beneath the earth; vampires (so-called) are an adaptive response to the worms, their peculiar abilities being well designed to stave off the worms (you have to read the book). Young Cal discovers he is a plague carrier, and that he has infected some other young women he's slept with; at the same time he is recruited by the Night Watch, a profoundly ancient vigilante society whose function is to monitor the perils from beneath, and to combat them.

The novel traces Cal's working out of all the above, his encounters with a young woman he falls in love with (but cannot touch, because to do so would vampirize her), and their eventual teaming up to carry on the fight. There is a lot of genuinely interesting

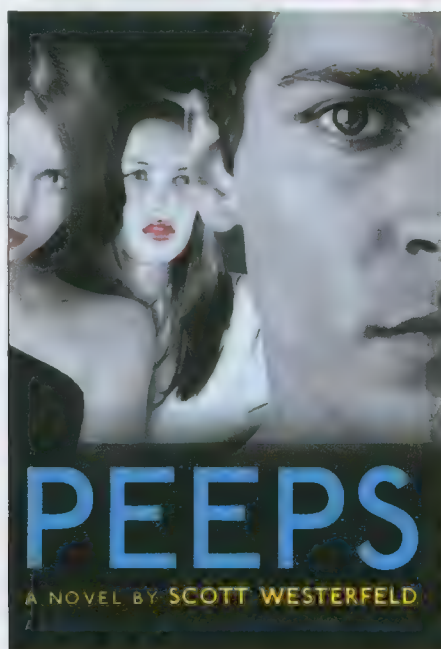
material on parasites, and on our intimate marriage with them (“Parasites are us”); and we learn a little bit more about the Night Watch and the history of the long vigil. We expect to learn more in the next volume.

It may be clear already, however, because I've spent so much time on *Peeps*, that *The Last Days* doesn't quite live up to the promise of more. Certainly there is nothing wrong with the book, sentence by sentence, chapter by chapter: Westerfeld is a writer whose steely sanserif control over his material ensures that everything of little account in a novel is impeccably couched; it does not, however, guarantee that he has not committed some greater error. The strategic problem of *The Last Days* is that – despite its this-is-it title, which is deflatingly revealed (after every reader of the book has long before guessed the secret) to be the name of a teenage band – it has almost nothing new to add to the ongoing story. This time round, there are five point-of-view characters, each of them fumblingly involved (even those with paranormal powers) in sufficiently decongesting their teenagedness to get a band together. I'm not instinct enough with the mad Whig World of popular music tags to suggest very securely what they play: but the lack of electronics, the obsessive attention paid to a 1970s Fender Stratocaster, and the general ambience all give a sense of something vaguely post-punk but respectful of the past. It is all interesting, but not quite interesting enough: especially when the paranormals are brought in to save the band's bacon whenever trouble looms.

The premier paranormal is – I'm afraid – a female vamp, vampire-like carrier like Cal, a Vamp Vampire Rock Star, who tends to lick her luminescent lips at dusk. A great deal of invisible sex, I believe, occurs. Each section of the book is prefaced by a passage from the journals of the Night Mayor, the head of the

SCORES › SHORT CHANGE, LONG CHANGELINGS





Night Watch whom we never met in *Peeps* and expected to meet in *The Last Days* but don't. It is enough for this book, which may only be the second instalment of something with an ending, that the gang's music itself inherently attracts the worms beneath, not least because the Vamp Vampire Rock Star has heard strange stanzas in an unnamable tongue in her basement and memorized them, and that the climax of things is a series of unnamably tedious fights with big worms, mostly offstage, while (even further off-stage) civilization nearly ends. But doesn't, I guess. Who can say? We're never there.

A third volume, under Westerfeld's chromium whip, may give us something worth skipping *The Last Days* for.

There was this clever scheme to review two changeling novels together, Delia Sherman's chirpy *Changeling* (Viking, 2006) and Keith Donohue's **The Stolen Child**, also brand new. In the event, only one got past the starting gate. *Changeling* all too fully adheres to its placement as a tale for readers 10 and up, and though it ostensibly takes place in "New York Between" it could have as easily been set in "Orlando World". There was nothing exactly wrong with the book, but Sherman (whose adult novels are engagingly complex) seemed tongue-tied by everything she could not fit out loud into her tale, seemed incapable of that "innocent" slide into deeper waters that takes the stories of the greater children's fantasists – like Joan Aiken or Kenneth Grahame or Diana Wynne Jones or William Mayne or Susan Price – into lands we do not forget: the kitchen inside the World Tree; the dusk hithe of Mole.

In any case, Keith Donohue's *The Stolen Child* was not designed for children, even children of all ages, and is really not comparable with Sherman's light skate over thin ice: but then most tales having anything to do with changelings are rather less cozy than Sherman's muesli take on children stolen from their home and becoming Dictates of Faerie. Even allowing for a slightly emollient ending, *The Stolen Child* faces the understorey of the changeling motif straight on: being half family romance, in which some of the dysfunctions mortals embody as they grow and age are seen as consequential upon profound trauma; and half a kind of deeper-than-tears parody of the terrifyingly ambivalent story of the Lost Boys in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904; published 1928), who are grotesques frozen in unending belatedness *unable to change*, or child escapees wrapt in unending strobes of joy, or both. But unlike the Lost Boys, Donohue's hobgoblins know enough to know that they must aspire to get back, to become changelings, to escape the diminishing Never Land forest they haunt, near a small city in America, as the twentieth century marches against them: bitterly aspire to steal some human child from its parents and replace it, to become mortal, then die.

There are two narrators, the thief and the stolen, though who is who in the end (as in any proper fantasy or horror tale involving the Double) is unclear; each of their tales is a manuscript, written down afterwards. The changeling who becomes Henry Day in the late 1940s speaks first. We learn that he had once been a boy of German stock named Gustav, and in 1859 had himself been stolen; so it takes him almost a century – once in faerie he remains caught in childhood, though his mind ages – to get back. There are hints throughout his narrative (which



*The Stolen Child* is published in the UK by Jonathan Cape, 319pp, £12.99 hb (above, but US edition reviewed)

alternates chapter by chapter with the second tale) that his new parents have been deeply distressed by their son's escapade in the forest, from which he has returned subliminally altered. There are even further hints that the man thinks of as his new father was not the biological sire of the real Henry Day, who speaks second. Once in faerie he loses touch with his old self and name, and is known only as Aniday. He becomes a Lost Boy. He frolics, he freezes, and slowly but surely he begins to circle moth-like around the magnet of his usurper's life. But it is hard to know what Aniday wants to accomplish: years are passing, he is a goblin, a disappeared, the part of the self of his family that has been left behind as the century progresses, shrinking the forest: asphyxiating the past.

Nothing of this is precisely unexpected; the power of the tale lies in Donohue's creation of two obsessive half-figures who cannot let go of their inchworm pas de deux as the years pass: as Henry Day (the German centenarian lad who grows up to play jazz piano in middle America for middle Americans) searches for his ancient pre-Lost Boy past while simultaneously coming to realize that the real Henry Day continues to cling – all out of time – to the passages of his daylight life; and as Aniday – accompanied by boy and girl shapes whose souls are ancient, and whose diction is hauntingly archaic – mounts attempt after attempt to claw himself back into the sun.

They never become one person, exactly. But by treating each of his narratives



absolutely literally, for *The Solen Child* never conveys a sense that anything is metaphorical of anything else, Donohue lets all his selves speak, simultaneously solitary and coral, catching up with each other for ever. Through these intersections – though they only meet once face to face – we gain by the end a sense of the inextricable complexities of selfhood during an era that soils us under before we have a chance to learn who we were back then, suddenly ago: the final message of *The Stolen Child* may be that humans of this time are irretrievably belated.

At the very end, though, after half a century of morganatic entrapment in the funhouse mirrors of self, Aniday lights out from his thinned forest like a Huck whose Mississippi is Interstates, tracking down the girl/woman/lover/fay who had accompanied him for most of this time, and who has already gone West, though maybe by now she has become irretrievably soiled under. But, like Gretel, like Thelma or Louise, she leaves a map on the ceiling of a cave under the town library they

have haunted for decades, clues of her route across the burning south to the Pacific Rim: maybe the waters will remain cool:

Around the outline of the country, she had etched and painted on that rough concrete a constellation of drawings invisible these many years. Hundreds of inscriptions, primitive and childlike, images laid over other images, each story told on top of its ancestor. Some of the drawings looked ancient...like paintings on a cave wall: a flock of crows lighting from a tree, a brace of quail, deer at a stream...horned men with rifles and fierce dogs...Ignatz throws the brick at Crazy Kat, Little Nemo slumbers in Wonderland...A mother with a child in her arms. A pod of whales arcing through the waves. The pictures unwrapped themselves in the dancing flames. The temperature rose as in an oven...

John Clute



Read if you're going the wrong way. Authors of manga books are presented in the traditional Japanese way, from right to left, starting at what would otherwise be the back... ➤

Geneon's voice cast is excellent. Michelle Ruff makes a delightful Chi and Crispin Freeman plays Hideki so sympathetically that any early exasperation at the character's naivety soon evaporates. However I confess I found myself irritated by later anime episodes (not to be found in the manga) that include a trip to the beach, Chi's attempts to cook a meal for Hideki, and the playing of a computer game, as these do little to advance the story or develop the characters and seem like fillers.

#### **SPOILER ALERT!**

The most disturbing difference between anime and manga occurs at the climax of the tale. In the manga, Chi's emotional turmoil has caused a breakdown of all the maintenance 'coms and as the city goes dark and water starts to flood the streets, Hideki finally confesses his love to Chi. Only now does he learn that "When Chi gives her whole self to you...and you become one not just in heart but in body...Chi will no longer be Chi." What was the true the motivation of this inventor who designed his 'daughters' with a reset button in – it's implied – her vagina? For Chi, sexual intercourse will result in total annihilation of the self, a loss of all her memories. Hideki staunchly insists, "I won't stop loving her because we can't go all the way. Even knowing that I...I want to stay with Chi." But the reader is left wondering what kind of 'happy ever after' there can be for this couple, unable to fully consummate their relationship. Here the anime wins over the manga by avoiding this thorny issue altogether and concentrating on action, increasing the tension as Dita and Zima, the two black-clad government persocoms, close in on Chi and threaten to shut her down for good before her secret programme is activated. Hideki's defence of Chi seems all the more heroic in the light of this dramatic and unexpected invasion.

Reader, beware! *Chobits* is extraordinarily seductive. I was surprised to discover how much I was willing to suspend my initial cynicism and surrender to its fairy-tale charms.

Footnote for CLAMP crossover completists: Chitose Hibaya's husband, the inventor of persocoms, is Ichiro 'Icchan' Mihara, also the inventor of *Angelic Layer* (CLAMP 1999–2000). Minoru Kokubunji's older sister is Kaede, owner of the angel Blanche, and one of young heroine Misaki's most skilled opponents in *Angelic Layer*. Misaki, Ohjiro and Sai can also be glimpsed at Kaede's bedside in one of Minoru's most poignant memories of his sister. Chitose Mihara and her two 'live' daughters are also to be found in CLAMP's newest manga *Kobato* (not yet available in translation).



urban legend after all. Indeed, other forces have become aware of her existence; two sinister black-clad figures are watching her from the rooftops nearby. What is Chi's secret? Is she a threat? Hideki and Chi's idyllic relationship seems doomed. And yet the one who holds the answers to Chi's mystery is closer than Hideki could ever have imagined. When Chi begins to hear a voice in her head and sees a mirror image of herself dressed in black asking, "Is Hideki the someone just for you?", the secrets of Chi's true identity are close to being revealed.

CLAMP's *Chobits* (2001–2) is best read as a twenty-first century fairy tale. But this is CLAMP's universe, and a moral ambiguity pervades both manga and anime from the very first images. For innocent Chi, with her long drifts of white-blond hair, is neither child nor young woman, and CLAMP depict her in the frilly, skimpy dresses of the Gothic Lolita style. Her outward appearance has been designed, it seems, to beguile and seduce.

Yet beneath the story's charming surface lie issues about the very nature of consciousness. Hideki is constantly asking the awkward questions such as "Does Chi feel pain?" that the others around him are reluctant to address. "When something traumatic happens to a human, we learn to get over it in time. But when a persocom experiences something, it's etched into its memory for all time, or at least until the owner erases it. On the other hand, all of a persocom's positive memories are in danger of being erased by an outsider at any time. Persocoms have no control over the most precious thing in the world...their memories."

Any avid reader of Asimov, Dick or Aldiss who comes to *Chobits* in search of a robot tale in similar vein, is going to be disappointed. Similarly, an anime fan hoping for a hot action series is not going to find satisfaction here, even though there are hints that the series might turn into a "girl = doomsday weapon" scenario like that of *Saikano*. *Chobits* is about relationships, memory and the search for happiness. For all its shonen pretensions, it is at heart a shojo tale. There are little frissons of titillation to keep the fan boys' attention but these, like the lacy frills on Chi's elaborate dresses are mostly decorative.

Now that *Chobits* is available in the UK both in anime and manga (translation by Shirley Kubo, English adaptation by Jake Forbes), how do the two versions of the story differ? Manga versions of successful animes often differ drastically from the original, sometimes disastrously so (as in the case of the awful *Escaflowne*). With *Chobits*, however, the manga came first, and both character design and story in the anime are faithful to the original. The characters are exquisitely drawn and their expressions convey the subtle nuances of shifting emotions. Sometimes a weak English dub can ruin a viewer's enjoyment but

### Chobits by CLAMP

Manga: Tokyopop 1–8 • Anime: Geneon, animation by Madhouse (UK distribution MVM)

provoke the inevitable nosebleeds. "She really is adorable. So soft and warm. If it weren't for these ears, I'd think she were human."

Fellow student Shimbo introduces the confused Hideki to boy genius Minoru Kokubunji, an expert on customizing persocoms. Minoru wonders whether Chi may be one of a fabled series of persocoms; "Chobits are said to be Artificial Intelligences capable of thinking and acting on their own." He posts Chi's picture on the web and begins to receive mysterious communications from an anonymous sender who cannot be traced.

"Just as people once became addicted to their computers, many people are now addicted to their persocoms to the exclusion of human beings." From Ms Shimizu, the pretty teacher at cram school to Yumi, to his young co-worker at Club Pleasure, the bar where he works nights, nearly everyone Hideki meets nurses a secret sadness which is related to persocoms. Minoru is always accompanied by Yuzuki, a sweet-natured persocom whom he has built specifically to resemble and behave his dead older sister Kaede.

As Hideki struggles to make sense of his confused feelings for Chi, he constantly tries to reason with himself. "No matter how much she seems like a person, she can never be alive. She may be cute but she's still a machine."

Then there is the strange children's picture book that catches Chi's attention when she is out shopping. Noticing her fascination, Hideki buys *A City With No People* and, on reading it with her, begins to notice parallels between the central character, a lonely long-eared rabbit, who is searching for "Someone just for me" and Chi's predicament. Soon more volumes appear and the mystified Hideki becomes certain that the story is describing his developing relationship with Chi.

Chi's unique qualities and innocent trusting nature soon attract attention from less scrupulous humans than honest Hideki. Persuaded to work in a peep show (she wants to earn money to help Hideki) yet not understanding what she will be required to do to entertain the customers, Chi reacts in a startling way when the owner tries to touch her up. Her reaction brings every other persocom to a standstill, resulting in a major technological crisis. The distraught Hideki finds her floating high above the street – and it is only when he calls to her that she snaps out of her trance, and the other persocoms return to normal. This extraordinary episode leads Minoru to suspect that Chi may indeed be a very special persocom and that *Chobits* may not be an

CLAMP's most distinguished and original work (in my opinion, at least) has to be xxxHOLIC. So why, whenever I checked out their best-selling mangas, did *Chobits* always come top of the list? Its pretty, pastel-coloured, lolicon-style covers gave little hint of its science-fictional theme, promising fan service rather than serious content. So it wasn't until the anime was recently released in the UK that I was persuaded to investigate both versions...

Hideki Motosuwa, like many of the young male protagonists in contemporary manga, is a 'good guy' – but utterly inexperienced in dealing with the opposite sex. He is also not the brightest of students, having failed to get into university. Now he's studying at cram school to re-sit the entrance examinations. Strangest of all in the near-future Tokyo he inhabits, he is a technophobe, having neither a computer nor any real understanding of how a computer works. He dreams of owning a persocom, the latest must-have invention, but knows that he can never afford one. Persocoms are sophisticated computers that resemble human beings; the only outward indicator that they are machines is their strange ear flaps which conceal ports and connection points. Persocoms have become so popular that they can be seen everywhere, companionably walking and talking with their owners, just like human beings. They can also transmit telephone calls, connect to the Internet and perform all the functions of our computers today. So when Hideki comes upon an abandoned female persocom lying in the garbage, he can't quite believe his luck. He takes her back to his room and attempts to get her to work. Being utterly ignorant about persocoms, he has no idea where her on/off switch is situated and after attempting all the obvious places, blushing, with trembling fingers, he parts her legs and...turns her on. Suddenly this beautiful inanimate life-size doll opens her eyes and gazes at him. She opens her pretty little mouth and says wonderingly, "Chi?"

Bewildered, Hideki believes at first that his inexperience in matters technological is the cause of his persocom's inability to do anything. But he comes to realize that, although Chi (as he names her, for that is all she can say) regards him with all the adoration of a newly born chick for its mother hen, this innocent persocom must have been abandoned by her original owner because she was faulty. So he sets out to try to teach her about the world. And because she is "so cute" and he really is a good guy, he suffers agonies of embarrassment every time Chi's effusive displays of physical affection



## Imagining Albion:

## The Great British Future

Written &amp; Presented by Francis Spufford • BBC Radio 4

Broadcast in four weekly parts from 22 June 2006

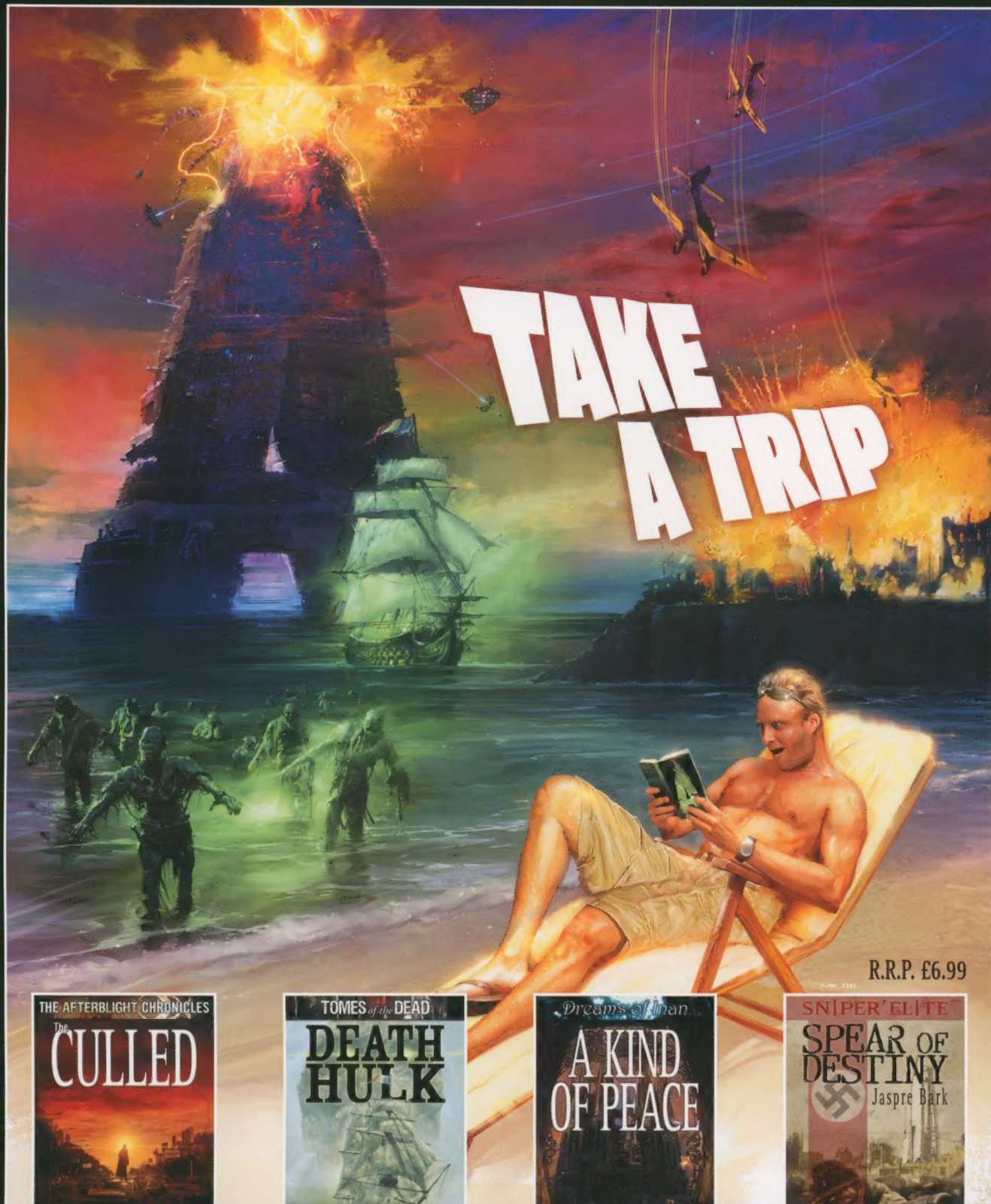
The BBC doesn't always 'get' science fiction. Over the years, it has broadcast excellent adaptations of science-fiction novels on Radios 3 and 4, and some execrable 'original' science-fiction serials, always hoping for, never coming close to, the success of *The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Attempts to discuss science fiction as serious literature on arts and general interest programmes have often failed miserably, because the presenter, although well-briefed, has certain unshakeable misconceptions about the genre, or because the feeling persists that the audience will not understand unless it's all explained very carefully, with no time to move beyond the genre nuts and bolts.

In the wake of all this *Imagining Albion*, a four-part series on Radio 4, presented by Francis Spufford (author of *The Child That Books Built* and *The Back-Room Boys*) comes as a welcome change. Spufford likes and is knowledgeable about sf, and is prepared to step beyond genre basics to present what amounts to a cultural meta-history of modern Britain, illustrated through science fiction. Each programme examines the matter of 'Albion' using a different theme – Albion as utopia, at war, in the future, and in space – and looks at how British science-fiction writers have addressed these themes, historically and in the present day. While he constructs a comfortable linear narrative, in which Wells is succeeded by Wyndham, who is succeeded by Clarke, and so on, the series simultaneously demonstrates what Spufford calls 'connectiveness', each episode passing through that same historical trajectory on a slightly different course, showing how the themes are inextricably interlinked. Each programme stands alone, but together the four show how modern sf writers are in dialogue with their predecessors, and how writers have engaged the culture of their times.

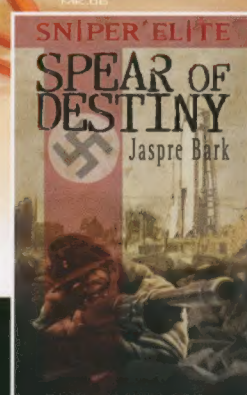
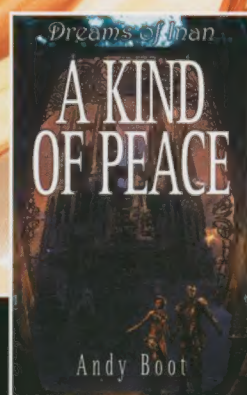
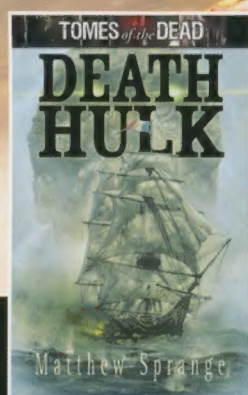
I have quibbles, inevitably. The temptation when listening from an informed point of view is to think, 'Oh, but you've missed X, and why didn't you include Y?' and to forget that only so much can be done with two hours, while most listeners would not necessarily start from the same point of view. On the other hand, I didn't cringe once; instead, I recognised the genre that Spufford was talking about as the same one I read, and that his insights were genuinely fresh and thought-provoking.


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